THE SHATTERED TALES

AN ALICE IN WONDERLAND RETELLING

TO ESCAPE A WONDERLAND

CECE LOUISE

To Escape a Wonderland

THE SHATTERED TALES

Cece Louise

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Contents

To Escape a Wonderland
Copyright
Also by Cece Louise
Dedication
World Map
Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23

Chapter 24
Epilogue
Acknowledgments
The Shattered Tales
About the Author

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“It's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then.”

—*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll

Prologue

I often wondered why I awoke that day.

Why someone like me was given a second chance. Why my life went on when I'd destroyed the lives of others. Would it not have been better to just keep on dreaming?

Perhaps that's why my eyelids fluttered open. Why my heart kept beating. Why my memories came rushing back. Because sometimes remembering—and regretting—was the cruelest fate of all.

"Laurel?" I blinked, and the hazy world around me slowly came into focus.

"Sh . . ." a soft voice said, sounding far away. "Easy now, dear, you've been through a lot."

"Laurel?" I called again, more urgently. Though female, the voice that replied to me wasn't familiar—and it certainly wasn't my sister's. I struggled to sit up. Although the voice was kind, panic clawed at my chest as my fuzzy mind grew alert.

"Drink this." There was that voice again, closer now. Gentle hands brought a cup to my mouth. My parched lips and scratchy throat welcomed the cool, soothing water.

"Where am I?" Blinking, I looked around. I was in a humble cottage, but I didn't recognize it. It certainly wasn't my home.

My home.

Terrible images flashed through my mind—knights bursting through the door, one setting the place on fire, two others grabbing me and dragging me outside, and then—

"Where's Laurel?" I tried to move from the straw bed I lay upon, but I was too weak.

"Who's Laurel?" The woman with the kind voice whispered to a man standing beside her, "Was she—"

"The other one," the man replied, just as softly, then took a small step toward me. "How are you feeling?"

“Who are you?” I didn’t recognize him or the woman. “Where is my sister?”

The two exchanged a look, then the woman knelt beside me. She grasped my hand and gave me a brave smile—the kind laced with sadness that people put on when they were preparing to tell you something they didn’t want to say and you didn’t want to hear. The same one the village healer had given me years ago the day my parents died.

“I’m Ursula,” the woman said kindly, “and this is my husband, Malone. I’m not sure how much you remember, but you were hurt—very hurt, I’m afraid.”

More memories flashed and I couldn’t avoid them, no matter how much I wished to.

King Abrax’s betrayal—the man I had trusted and even thought I loved.

The sword his head knight, Kartoff, had plunged into my abdomen, following King Abrax’s orders for my execution.

Then pain—so much pain—had shot through my body like snake venom. I hadn’t been able to cry out, stand, or even breathe.

Inadvertently, my hand clutched my stomach. It still throbbed with a dull pain but was now heavily bandaged.

“I—I remember.” My words were a whisper, the weight of them making it hard to catch my breath. “But please, my sister, can you tell me, is she—”

“She didn’t make it.” The man, Malone, cut off my desperate plea and last hope. “Another knight found her and killed her.” His eyes were heavy with sorrow and shame. “I’m sorry.”

I was still lying on the flimsy straw mattress, but the earth beneath me somehow shifted and my head spun.

Malone went on to explain how he had been one of Abrax’s knights, and after Kartoff stabbed me, he’d been ordered to bury me. Malone dragged me into the woods and dug a hole. When he placed me in it, he discovered I was still alive—though just barely.

He’d wrapped my wound and filled in the grave—making it look like I’d been laid to rest there. Then he snuck me to his cottage, where he and his wife had cared for me until now.

Ursula spoke up, saying it was a miracle that I was alive, that I was lucky—but I didn’t feel lucky. All I felt was the deepest loss I’d ever known, and

an even deeper guilt that my mistakes had cost my younger sister, Laurel, her life.

“It’s all my fault.” I couldn’t bear to hear any more words of comfort. “I believed Abrax. I trusted him! I even fell—” I cut my words off with a quick shake of my head, not wanting to admit to these kind souls the extent I’d fallen under Abrax’s spell. That I’d believed myself in love with him. What sort of foolish woman falls for a man who uses her and then plots her execution?

I went on. “Laurel was right about him and I wouldn’t listen to her. And now—”

I could no longer speak, tears overtaking me.

I don’t know how long I wept. My companions didn’t offer any more platitudes, but Ursula wrapped her arms around me and held me while I cried.

As my tears fell, I mourned so much. The destruction of my home and life. The betrayal I’d suffered at the hands of Abrax, who had only used me as a pawn. But mostly, the loss of my beloved sister, my only family.

“I know you’re hurt, dear.” Ursula’s kind voice broke through my tumultuous thoughts. “But unfortunately, we can’t stay here. We need to leave for Fernshire. Tonight.”

“Fernshire?” I recognized the name of the kingdom north of us here in Tover. But it was a long journey, separated by the vast and wild Eternity Forest.

Ursula nodded. “Malone has deserted Abrax’s knights. It’s not safe for us to stay—or for you.”

“Aye,” Malone said, “Abrax’s power is growing, and he’s preparing to cut off the road to stop the people of Tover from fleeing his unjust rule.”

“But what will we do in Fernshire?” I asked.

“Find work, I hope. But right now, escaping is the most important thing.”

“The journey will be difficult,” Ursula said, “but you won’t need to ride or walk. We’ll transport you in our wagon. And, dear, is there a name you’d like us to call you?”

“My name’s Aviva,” I replied automatically. “Most people call me Avi.”

“Not anymore,” Malone said. “Abrax thinks you’re dead, and we need to keep it that way. You can’t use that name anymore. Pick another.”

I nodded slowly. It hurt to lose my name along with everything else, but in a way, it was a just penance. I thought for a moment, then finally decided on my grandmother’s name, holding onto some semblance of my identity and family ties. “You may call me Alice.”

Chapter 1
- BAYNE -

A FEW YEARS LATER

And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?

I shook my head to banish the unbidden words dancing in my brain and tapped my heel against my horse's flank.

Abbott responded appropriately, quickening his pace, although I wasn't really in a hurry.

It had been three days since I'd left the kingdom of Fernshire in hopes of a fresh start, but I still didn't feel any freer. The voices in my head persisted, a reminder of the time I'd spent trapped in my mind.

I'd gone mad, they said. Somehow, by looking into the eyes of the beast I'd sought to vanquish—the mysterious and terrible Jabberwock—I'd become lost, transported to a strange and ominous world.

It was a land that had existed only in my mind, but it had been as real to me as the forest I rode through now. Even now, a few weeks after they found a way to bring me back to my senses, I didn't feel quite the same.

All the frightened, distrusting looks I'd received from others around the kingdom certainly hadn't helped. Not that I could blame anyone, but it was obvious that people feared me for the connection I'd had to the monster. And how I'd acted under its influence. All those stares and whispers had solidified my decision to leave.

Fernshire didn't need me. The kingdom I'd pledged my life to in service as a knight. The kingdom I loved and had vowed to always protect. It didn't want me anymore, so there was nothing left for me to do but move on.

The only question that remained was, to where?

For three days, I'd leisurely ridden the path through Eternity Forest away from Fernshire, and I still didn't know.

A voice in the distance startled me. “I’ve had quite enough. Stop being ridiculous and move this instant!”

It wasn’t the vexation in the voice that surprised me. No, the high-pitched tone was what gave me pause. It was a woman’s voice.

Although it wasn’t unheard of for a woman to be traveling through Eternity Forest, most would only do so with ample protection. Why was this woman so angry? Was she in trouble?

My knightly instinct took over and I quickly directed Abbott from the path toward the disturbance.

“You gluttonous beast.” The voice grew louder as I moved toward it. “Stop that right now and come with me!”

Abbott and I entered a grove, and the owner of the bossy voice came into view.

“May I be of assistance?” I called, biting back a smile now that I could see what the trouble was. A black horse was munching away on the fruit of an apple tree, while the owner of said horse tried in vain to get the beast to move, tugging upon its reins.

The woman gasped and spun around, dropping the reins. She snatched a bow from her back, then nocked an arrow, pointing it at me.

“Stop right there.” Her voice was even more threatening than before.

“Now hold on.” I raised a hand slowly, not wanting to give her any reason to shoot. “I think you’ve misunderstood—I mean you no harm. I was riding on the path and heard the commotion. You sounded distressed, so I came to see if I could help.”

The woman narrowed her eyes as she studied me, keeping her arrow fixed, although I was relieved that she didn’t draw the string back.

“I’m a knight,” I said, attempting to ease her fear. “From Fernshire. I promise you, I—”

“I know who you are.” The venom in her tone heightened.

I froze. Was that the reason for her animosity? Did she know of the state I had been in recently at Fernshire? Was this to be my life now, feared by everyone as if *I* were some kind of monster?

I cleared my throat and spoke carefully. “Whatever you may have heard, I assure you, I won’t hurt you . . .” I met her eyes, and recognition flashed across my mind. This woman seemed familiar to me too. But why?

I studied her, but I couldn’t place her honey-blonde hair or distinct amber eyes. But the green velvet cloak she wore over a sturdy blue traveling dress looked familiar, as did the black horse behind her, happily munching low-hanging apples from the tree.

“Wait a minute.” Recognition came full force. “That horse—” I slid from my saddle, not even caring about this mysterious woman’s bow. “That’s the Princess of Fernshire’s horse. And that’s her cloak!” I took a step toward the woman, who was most certainly not Princess Opal of Fernshire, even though she had her things. “Who *are* you?”

Her only answer was to draw her bow back. “Don’t take another step.”

I froze. Clearly, this woman was not to be trifled with.

“Your knife.” She inclined her head toward my waist, where my large hunting knife hung in a belted sheath.

For a moment, I didn’t move. This was ridiculous. I was the head knight of Fernshire—at least I had been, up until I’d resigned a few days ago. I’d just faced the most fearsome creature in all the land, and although I hadn’t come out of that ordeal completely unscathed, I had survived.

And now I was about to be bested by a woman who couldn’t even get a horse to stop eating apples?

“Now!” Her minimal patience appeared to have run out. “Put it on the ground.”

“I don’t know what you’re doing,” I said as I dropped my knife at my feet. If she moved closer to grab it, I could disarm her. “But you won’t get away with it. Stealing from the princess is a crime against the kingdom of Fernshire.”

She didn’t move an inch. Instead, she jerked her head to the side. “Against that tree.”

I mentally cursed her—and myself—as I slowly walked toward the trunk of a large apple tree. Why on earth had I tried to play the hero? I should have ignored what I’d heard and continued on my way. After all, I wasn’t even a knight anymore.

“Face the tree.” The woman took a few steps toward me, her arrow level with my chest.

With a sigh, I turned toward the tree. A few feet away, Princess Opal’s horse—Cleopatra was its name—swished its tail and snorted as if scolding me for interrupting its supper. The leaves rustled behind me, most likely

from the woman retrieving my knife. I didn't dare make any sudden movements now with my back turned and her armed with two weapons.

"Put your forehead against the tree," the woman said from behind me, sounding closer.

I muttered a curse under my breath but did as she told me. Was she going to shoot me in the back? Did she not have the stomach to do it while I faced her?

"Hands behind your back."

Begrudgingly, I obeyed.

More movement and then a rope looped around my wrists, tugging them together.

Now was my chance. She couldn't have an arrow at my back and tie me up at the same time.

I whipped around and swept my leg underneath hers, knocking her off her feet. My knife flew from her belt and landed a few feet away as the woman shrieked and crashed to the forest floor.

Ignoring her, I dove toward my knife. She had never truly bound my hands and the loose rope at my wrists fell away.

On my knees, I grabbed my knife from the carpet of freshly fallen leaves. Then I jumped to my feet and turned in time to see the woman wrestling with her bow, hastily trying to nock an arrow. I snatched them both.

"Give me that!" She lunged for them, but I was a good deal taller than her and easily held them high above her reach. With my other hand, I leveled my blade at her.

Her gaze caught it and she backed away, hands landing flat against the tree trunk, her chest rising and falling rapidly from our tussle.

"What do you want?" she demanded between her teeth as if I had been the one to start this whole battle.

"Some answers."

Chapter 2
- AVIVA -

I stared at Sir Bayne, the kingdom of Fernshire's head knight, my heart racing. What rotten luck. Of all the people to cross paths with from my former kingdom, he was the absolute worst.

I'd seen him often over my time as a maid at the Fernshire palace. He was well-known and highly respected.

He was young for a head knight, at most five years older than me, but King Nathanial had thought so highly of him that he'd been promoted many times over his years of service, finally earning his place at the top of the knights' rankings. He had a reputation for being extremely dedicated to the king and stringent in his morals. Which meant the likelihood of him accepting a bribe or looking the other way at my thievery was little to none.

Although he towered over me, I lifted my chin as I faced him, not wanting to appear at a disadvantage. "Just take your things and go. We can forget this whole thing ever happened."

He laughed, then slipped his knife back into the holder at his waist and pointed at me. "I remember you now," he said as if he was quite proud of himself. "You're a maid at the Fernshire castle."

I didn't react to his words, but inside I cursed. I'd honestly hoped my low station would prevent him from remembering me.

"Alice." He snapped his fingers when his mind landed on my name. "That's it. Alice—you're one of Princess Opal's lady's maids."

"Yes, I was." I crossed my arms. "Now leave."

"What I don't understand is why you stole the princess's things and ran off to the forest." His brow creased. "What kind of trouble are you in?"

"I didn't steal anything!" It was a lie, but if I could convince him it was true, perhaps he would leave and let me go on my way. "Princess Opal gave me her horse, her cloak, and supplies for my journey."

“She gave them to you?” He raised his eyebrows. “Why would she do that?”

“Because we’re friends.”

“I don’t believe you.” His tone dripped with condescension. “If you and the princess were truly friends, she wouldn’t let you go running off into this forest alone with only a fine cloak and a bow and arrow for protection. She’d have sent knights with you.”

Why did he have to be so smug? No wonder Opal had called him Sir Vain behind his back. Not because he was overly concerned with his appearance, but because he was so arrogant.

“She wanted to.” I swallowed. “But I didn’t think it was right for the kingdom to waste its resources on me—not after everything that happened there—so I snuck away in the middle of the night.” Did he believe me? I certainly wasn’t going to tell him the real reason I had snuck off. Not even Opal knew my true identity or why I needed to go to Tover, and I didn’t want her to.

“You’re a liar.” He was smugger than ever. “And not a very good one at that. We both know no matter how close you are with the princess, she never would have given you her horse.” He looked me straight in the eye. “She positively dotes on that insatiable beast.”

I averted my gaze. It was true.

I hadn’t been without guilt when I’d taken Opal’s horse, and I’d only done so because the horse knew me well. A mistake on my part, I could see now, for I should have chosen a less pampered and less recognizable horse.

I met Sir Bayne’s judgmental stare. “I have every intention of returning the horse to her.”

“I’m glad to hear it. So why delay?” He swept his arm to the side. “We are only a few days’ ride back to Fernshire, and I’d be happy to escort you.”

Back to Fernshire? The thought was torturous. I couldn’t bear to delay another minute. And it wasn’t because I feared punishment for my crime of thievery. No, I knew by the end of this journey I would be facing the inside of a cell. But I needed it to be in Tover, not Fernshire.

“No, I can’t do that.” My voice broke slightly, and I hated myself for resorting to pleading with this man. “I need to get to Tover. It’s urgent.”

Bayne crossed his strapping arms, his gaze unyielding. “Why?”

It was no use lying, but I couldn't tell him the truth either. What *could* I tell him? I pondered what I knew about him. He was an overzealous knight, driven by codes of responsibility and righteousness. Despite his arrogance, I believed him to be honorable, at least where one's duty was concerned.

I squared my shoulders. "Because I have reason to believe my last living family member is there. A younger sister whom I was cruelly separated from and thought to be dead. I recently learned she may still be alive. Surely you can understand my need to find out?"

He paused, searching my face for any sign that I was being dishonest, but I didn't flinch under his gaze. Every word I spoke was true.

"I see . . ." He brushed a hand across his trim, dark-auburn beard and seemed to ponder this.

I held my breath, wondering if I had gotten through to him. Would he make an exception and look the other way, just this once?

After a moment, he spoke. "Those seem like urgent circumstances indeed—and noble, although your execution leaves a bit to be desired . . . So I'm prepared to offer you a deal."

I licked my lips. "What kind of deal?" I had learned the hard way the high cost of putting my trust in a man, and I'd vowed to never make that mistake again.

"I will travel with you to Tover." He bobbed his head. "In addition to providing you with extra protection along the way, I will ensure that the princess's belongings are returned to her once you reach your destination."

His superior manner irked me more than if he had threatened to bind me and take me back to Fernshire.

"I don't need protection." I glared at him.

This seemed to amuse him. "Don't think of it that way then. I'll simply be here to see that the horse is returned to its rightful owner."

"So you'll be protecting the horse? How daring." I rolled my eyes. "Your reputation as a brave knight will live on in legends far beyond your years."

He frowned, and I was pleased that I had wiped his self-righteous smile off his face. "I didn't become a knight to bolster my reputation."

"No? What was it then?" My words were deceptively sweet. "You thought becoming a knight and pandering to the king was the quickest way to grow your power? That he'd reward you for your loyal service by letting you marry the princess?"

Bayne’s eyes narrowed, just slightly, and although he quickly returned his face to a mask of indifference, I knew my words had hit their mark. “You seem to know quite a lot about the kingdom of Fernshire for a maidservant.”

“You shouldn’t be so dismissive of servants, *Sir* Bayne.” I said his title with feigned reverence. “We have a distinct advantage over those of rank—we are so invisible in our lowliness, we see and hear things others don’t.”

“So you admit to being an eavesdropper in addition to a thief?”

“In this case, no. I was the princess’s lady’s maid, remember? I spent much time with her and she confided in me.” I lifted my chin. “She made no secret of her disdain for you.”

He cleared his throat. “Shouldn’t we begin our journey if you’re so eager to reach Tover, or would you rather stand here and reminisce about our former kingdom all day?”

I released an irritated breath, then turned toward Cleopatra. I was ready to leave this conversation and him behind.

“Wait.” A light hand on my shoulder stilled me. I whipped around and Bayne’s arm quickly fell to his side. Then he held it out to me. “Do we have a deal?”

I stared at his proffered hand for a moment, then at his brown eyes, a few shades darker than his russet-colored hair, his brows creased in uncertainty.

The hesitation in his gaze was what struck me. I had seen this man many times before—he’d always projected strength, decisiveness, and arrogance. Never had I seen him so thoughtful, eyes questioning and lips quirked in a hint of a smile. His hair was uncharacteristically messy, falling over his furrowed brows. This unassuming version of him caught me off guard.

Could I trust him?

Not with my secret—there was no one I could trust with that. But could I trust him to keep his word?

Despite my misgivings, I suspected I could. Not because he held any loyalty or fondness toward me, but for the sort of man I knew him to be. The sort of man he’d proven himself in his service to Fernshire. Honest and just. So much so that if I refused his offer, I was certain I’d find myself bound on the back of his horse and heading back to Fernshire to face the consequences of my rash thievery.

“Very well.” I accepted his handshake, his large hand practically engulfing mine. His grip was strong and steady, a physical reminder that he could keep me safe, just as he promised. I shook away the twinge of comfort that brought me. It was foolish to rely on anyone but myself. This man would turn on me in an instant if he knew the truth.

“Glad we could reach an agreement.” Bayne released my hand, showing no sign that our touch had brought him any sort of conflict. “Let’s be on our way, shall we?”

Without another word, I marched over to Cleopatra’s saddle. “I hope your feast was worth it,” I grumbled under my breath as I mounted the horse and snapped my reins, then began making my way through the forest.

Within moments, Bayne rode up next to me.

I cast a sidelong glance his way and noticed my bow slung across his back alongside his. “May I have my bow back, please?”

“I think I’ll hang on to it a little longer. I’d hate for you to get any ideas . . . After all, thief is only a few steps away from murderer.”

His last word took the breath from my lungs quicker than a hearty gust could steal the leaves from a tree on a late fall day.

Murderer . . .

He said it flippantly, as a joke, but it resonated in my mind like a brand searing flesh.

I set my gaze straight ahead and forced myself to take deep, even breaths.

He doesn’t know, I told myself.

But still, it was a reminder of the distance between us. Of what this situation truly was. For all his amicability, this man was only here to ensure the petty crimes I’d committed against his kingdom were rectified.

But what he didn’t know was that I’d done things far worse—things that couldn’t be rectified.

Chapter 3
- BAYNE -

“We’d reach Tover in half the time if we took the main road,” I said, trying to maneuver Abbott between the dense trees.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Alice shot me a scathing look. “And I’m surprised you do. There are only two of us. Robbers and outlaws prey on those traveling that way. We’re safer in the forest.”

“*You’re* afraid of robbers? That’s ironic.”

She didn’t answer, and although I wouldn’t admit it, she had a point. I’d traveled the main road often as a knight, albeit usually in a large group, and I knew the dangers.

Although, I couldn’t help but wonder how she had come to know so much about the perils of Eternity Forest. Maids were generally not well-traveled. Most came straight from the village of Fernshire.

But then again, everything about this woman was perplexing. I stole a glance at her. Her golden hair gleamed in what little sunlight peeked through the trees. With her back straight and unyielding, she had an almost regal air about her as if she hadn’t just served royals but was one herself.

I’d felt quite satisfied when I’d recalled where I knew her from, but my triumph had been short-lived once I realized I knew absolutely nothing else about her. Nothing that could offer a clue as to why she’d stolen the princess’s things and run off. It wasn’t as if we’d had reasons to interact. She’d been a lady’s maid to the princess and I’d been a knight.

Granted, over my years of service, there had been a few maids at the palace who hinted they desired a more personal relationship with me. But they’d quickly given up when they realized my focus was on my job and not flirtation. And I certainly didn’t recall this Alice being one of them.

Perhaps Princess Opal was the reason Alice seemed to dislike me so much—for it was true that the princess and I held no regard for each other. Princess Opal had resented my good relationship with her father and had

done everything in her power to make my job more difficult. While she'd said enough disdainful things to my face, I didn't doubt she'd said even worse in private.

It certainly hadn't helped when King Nathanial had grown so frustrated with his daughter that he'd threatened to marry her to me. A prospect I hadn't exactly relished but would have gone along with for the good of the kingdom.

Although maybe the real reason Alice seemed so annoyed with me was the fact that I had insisted on riding with her to Tover. But it was a more generous offer than forcing her back to Fernshire. And besides, if she was so fearful of robbers and outlaws, she should be grateful to have me along.

But I had a feeling I wouldn't be getting a thank-you from her. And that was fine—I didn't need it. I hadn't become a knight to earn appreciation.

And while interacting with her was trying, in a strange way, I almost felt grateful to the prickly woman beside me. I had a purpose now—albeit a brief and not very exciting one—but a purpose nonetheless. And a clear destination.

Tover.

The kingdom was much more to me than just a goal on this simple errand. Once—practically another lifetime ago—it had been my home.

But now, all it held were memories. Bad memories. It certainly wasn't a place I'd ever planned to return to. Perhaps it was foolish that I was now.

But I wouldn't focus on that.

"What's your sister's name?" I asked Alice, partly out of curiosity and partly to break the silence.

"That's none of your concern." Her words were clipped, like a book snapping shut.

"I'm familiar with Tover." I wasn't going to be put off by her waspishness. "Perhaps I can be of some assistance in helping you locate her —"

"That won't be necessary. In fact, the moment we get to Tover, I will relinquish this horse into your care so you can do your knightly duty and return it to the princess."

"If I were worried about my knightly duty, I'd be returning you and the horse to Fernshire right now, not taking you to Tover."

That got her attention. She turned to me with a question in her eyes.

“I’m not the head knight of Fernshire anymore,” I explained. “I recently resigned.”

“Oh.” She was clearly taken aback by this admission, and it seemed to stun her into silence.

Until a few minutes later when she broke it.

“What made you decide to stop being a knight?”

“So we’re sharing stories about ourselves now?” My tone wasn’t angry like hers had been, merely curious. Why should I answer her question when she wouldn’t answer mine?

“I just—I’m surprised, that’s all. You might not remember me, but I remember you. You were the most stringent knight I’d ever seen.”

“I thank you for the compliment.”

The look she gave me said she wasn’t trying to compliment me. Rather than take offense, I merely shrugged. “There wasn’t a place for me there anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

I chose my next words carefully. “I suppose you’re aware of the trouble I faced in Fernshire recently?”

“I know you were put under some sort of spell by the monster that was attacking the kingdom.”

I nodded. She clearly knew enough about what had occurred there that I didn’t need to explain the details any further. “After I was freed from the spell the beast put me under, nothing was the same. People see me differently now—they fear me. Not intentionally, I suppose, but I see it in their eyes. My association with a monster makes them view me as a monster too. I didn’t want to spend the rest of my days being seen like that. I wanted a fresh start.”

“Now that’s something I can understand . . .” Her resigned words and sad tone surprised me. As irritated as she was, I certainly hadn’t expected her to admit to us sharing common ground.

Before I could comment, a rustle in the trees caught my attention.

“Sh!” I held up a hand, listening closer.

“What?” She stopped her horse and inclined her head.

“I heard something,” I whispered.

She paused, listening with me, her lack of patience soon getting the better of her. “I don’t hear any—”

Her words were cut short by an arrow whizzing past and landing with a *thunk* in a nearby tree trunk.

In a flash, I crossed my horse in front of Alice's, shielding her, then drew my bow.

But my efforts to defend us were soon proven futile.

One by one, men materialized between the branches. Their green and brown attire made them almost blend in with the forest, but each one had a bow drawn on us.

I slowly lowered my weapon, not wanting to appear a threat. We were hopelessly outnumbered.

"Don't do anything rash . . ." I said to Alice under my breath. "They've got us covered."

I looked up, and sure enough, there were even more men in the trees above us, bows drawn. The arrow that had flown past us had been intended to miss. I had a feeling the next one wouldn't.

"Well, well, well . . . what do we have here?" A man strode toward us, his face shadowed by a hood.

"We don't want any trouble," I called out and jerked my head toward my saddlebag. "You'll find money in there. Take it and go."

The man stopped. "I'm not interested in your money, fool. I'm interested in you." His shaded gaze landed on Alice and stayed fixed. "And her."

I raised my bow again, pointing it at the man's chest. "You won't touch her."

So much for not doing anything rash.

Threatening what appeared to be the leader of this group was only going to earn me a dozen arrows lodged into my chest and back. But my instinct as a knight took over, and I wouldn't let this man hurt Alice without a fight. Part of my training as a knight meant protecting a woman's honor. I'd do whatever it took to keep her safe.

Behind me, Alice whispered, "Sir Bayne, don't—"

"Listen to the wench," the man said with disdain. "This one isn't worth protecting. King Abrax certainly didn't think so."

Low laughter rumbled across the group.

Alice directed her horse out from behind mine as her voice rang out, loud and scathing, but it shook—she was obviously more frightened than she was trying to appear. "What do you want, Kartoff?"

My grip on my bow faltered and I lowered it, turning to her. Did Alice know this man? Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised—she was a horse thief, after all. For all I knew, she was in league with bands of criminals. Perhaps she had led us to them on purpose. Although based on the exchange so far, she didn't seem to have any affinity with them.

The man she called Kartoff pulled down his hood, revealing stringy, unkempt brown hair that matched his unruly beard. "I want to know how the woman I killed with my own hands is standing here before me." He gave a wicked grin. "Back from the dead, Aviva?"

Aviva?

I stared at her. Had she been using a fake name at the palace? Who *was* this woman?

She licked her lips, her eyes flickering toward mine, a hint of shame behind the fear. Then she turned back to Kartoff. "It appears you aren't as good with your sword as you might think, Kartoff."

He laughed. "Or perhaps there is something of the witch in you after all." His dark eyes flashed from her to me. "And how does the woman who led to the downfall of King Edmond come to be traveling with the esteemed head knight of Fernshire?"

King Edmond?

I quickly placed the name. King Edmond had been the former ruler of Tover. A good and just king who—rumor had it—had been murdered by his own brother, Abrax, for his throne. What could this woman—a maid, if that's truly what she was—possibly have had to do with that?

Thankfully, King Abrax's reign had been short-lived, for he had also died. Now King Edmond's daughter ruled the land, another just ruler like her father.

I knew all these things from my time as a Fernshire knight. King Nathanial had been worried about a war with Tover during Abrax's reign. And even after he died, King Nathanial had expressed concern over a rogue group of Abrax's followers who had disappeared.

Apparently, we had found those followers.

Alice—no, Aviva—spoke up. "Me traveling with this man is purely coincidental. Leave him be."

Kartoff ignored her, jerking his head at his companions. "Tie them both up and bring them back to camp."

Chapter 4
- AVIVA -

“You’re not just a maid from Fernshire, are you?” Bayne demanded in a harsh whisper once we were alone.

Kartoff’s men had taken us back to their camp and placed us in a guarded cave. With our backs to each other, we were tied at our waists to a stake deep in the ground. We sat on the hard dirt, our hands bound tightly in front of us.

“No,” I said. There was no point in lying to him about my identity anymore. “My real name is Aviva—Avi is what most people called me. I used to live in Tover. I was a healer there.”

“A healer?” His voice was dubious.

“Yes.” There was a bite in my tone over his disbelief. “I worked with herbs and forest plants to ease ailments and provide remedies to the villagers.”

“I know what a healer is.” Bayne’s reply was equally brusque. “What I don’t understand is how you went from being a healer to a maid.”

“I had no choice. It wasn’t safe for me to stay there or use my real identity.”

“Because King Abrax tried to have you killed? Why did he do that?”

I pressed my lips together, not about to share all my secrets with this man. “Because I was a threat to his reign.”

“How—” Bayne’s interrogation was cut short by three men entering the cave, Kartoff coming last.

At the sight of him, my hands turned clammy. He was older and more weathered than I recalled, but his eyes were the same ones I saw in my nightmares, piercing me with their hostility before he pierced me with his sword. He had failed to kill me that day, but I knew once he had exhausted my use now, he would try to execute me once again—this time ensuring the job was complete.

Even so, I held my chin high and met his disdainful stare with one of my own as he marched in, fighting to keep my body from trembling. However, his gaze quickly turned to Bayne.

“All right, Knight,” Kartoff said, “let’s you and I have a chat.”

The ropes that bound me and Bayne loosened, freeing him, then a man secured me to the stake again. Two men pulled Bayne away and led him to the cave wall. They yanked his cloak from his shoulders, then they pulled his gray hunting tunic over his head, leaving his torso bare. His belted sheath hung empty at his waist, for Kartoff’s men had seized his large knife in the forest. After tossing his cloak and tunic to the ground, they tied his wrists once more.

Bayne tugged at the restraints, his broad, bare shoulders tensing and his corded muscles straining, but the rope didn’t give. The two men who had secured him stepped aside, letting Kartoff approach.

“Now . . . Sir Bayne, is it?” Kartoff grinned at Bayne as if they were friends chatting over a cup of ale at the local tavern. “This should be an easy conversation. You can keep your life in exchange for some simple information.” Kartoff placed his hands behind his back and lowered his voice. “Where is the Fernshire beast being held? And more importantly, what is the secret to controlling it?”

My stomach dropped, a sickening feeling creeping over me. Kartoff knew about the Fernshire beast. The Jabberwock—a strange and fearsome dragon that had plagued the kingdom for weeks before it was stopped. One Jabberwock had been vanquished, but one remained, now under close guard by the Fernshire knights.

And Kartoff not only knew that, but he wanted it—and worse, the knowledge of how to make the beast do his bidding. This wasn’t just any monster. Rumor had it that with the right knowledge, the dragon could be controlled. But without it, it would control you and wreak terrible destruction.

I stared at Bayne. Did he really know the secret of controlling the Jabberwock? It was possible, for I knew Bayne had been the knight to head up the hunt for the monster in the first place. He’d also fallen under its spell, spending days in madness, barely escaping with his life.

My question remained unanswered, for Bayne said nothing.

Kartoff was unfazed. “Still protecting your kingdom, I see . . .” He raised a hand, signaling one of his henchmen. A large man stepped forward and curled his fist, then delivered a blow to the side of Bayne’s abdomen with a sickening thud.

Bayne groaned and coughed, then shook his head as if clearing the pain from his body. Kartoff nodded and the henchman punched him again. And again. I squeezed my eyes shut, but that didn’t stop the dull strikes from accosting my ears.

“Enough.” Kartoff raised a hand and then said to Bayne, “I will ask you again, where is the beast of Fernshire being kept?”

“I will tell you”—Bayne panted between gasping breaths—“*nothing*.”

“We shall see . . .” Kartoff turned to his companions and gave a nod.

Both henchmen grabbed Bayne roughly and turned him to face me, his back to Kartoff. I swallowed thickly at the bruises already forming on Bayne’s abdomen where the men had struck him.

Kartoff took something from one of his men, then walked slowly back to Bayne. “I will give you one more chance to answer me.” He raised his hand and my breath faltered. He held a leather whip.

I turned my gaze back to Bayne. “Tell him,” I commanded in a harsh whisper. Perhaps he didn’t know what Kartoff was capable of, but I did. If Bayne continued to be stubborn this would end with his death. A brutal, merciless death.

Bayne narrowed his eyes at me, gave a slight shake of his head, then fixed his gaze beyond me on the cave wall.

Resigned. Fearless. Ready. He wasn’t giving in.

“Very well.” Kartoff handed the whip to his man with a nod.

“Stop!” I cried out as the man raised the whip and struck Bayne’s bare back. I screamed again as the leather cord connected, but my cry was muffled by Bayne’s own.

Two more deafening snaps followed and Bayne fell to his knees. At Kartoff’s command, his men hauled Bayne up and turned him to face Kartoff again. I clamped my teeth together to stop a sob from escaping when I saw the three angry gashes lining Bayne’s back.

“I’ve only begun playing,” Kartoff told Bayne, pure menace in his tone. “And I have quite the arsenal of tools behind me that my men would love to use on you. Answer my questions and you can end this.”

“I would rather die”—Bayne panted and gritted his teeth, sweat dripping down his forehead like the blood dripped from his back—“than betray my kingdom.”

“A kingdom that practically sacrificed you to a monster? That rewarded you for your years of service by locking you up as a madman?” Kartoff laughed. “*That* is the kingdom you protect?”

But Bayne was done talking. Kartoff directed his men to turn him again, and when Bayne’s eyes briefly met mine, there was an apology in them. As if he was sorry for what I was going to witness here today.

I wanted to scream at him. Free myself from these bonds and knock some sense into him. Protecting this secret wasn’t worth his life. But all I could do was shake my head as tears dripped down my cheeks.

“We’ll see how you stand up to the cat.” Kartoff placed another weapon in his man’s hands and my blood ran cold when I saw it.

Another whip, but this one was made of chain and had nine pointed ends. Bile rose in my throat as I envisioned the damage it would do to the unwavering man in front of me.

“Tell me, Knight, have you ever faced the cat-o’-nine-tails before?” Kartoff asked while his man stepped in front of Bayne, bringing the metal, claw-tipped whip into his view. No doubt thinking the sight of the brutal weapon would cause Bayne to talk.

The muscles in Bayne’s neck tensed when he saw it. He swallowed slowly and then averted his gaze, saying nothing.

“Very well.” Kartoff gave the signal and his man raised his arm, turning to Bayne’s back.

“Stop,” I shrieked. “The Jabberwock is being kept in a cave not far from the Fernshire palace!”

Kartoff’s wide gaze flew to me and he raised a hand, halting his man. He marched toward me and grabbed my chin, forcing me to look into his eyes, narrow with suspicion. “And how would *you* know that?”

“Because I was a maid at the Fernshire palace.” It was hard to speak clearly against his tight grip. Every nerve ending in my body prickled with disgust at Kartoff’s grimy face so close to mine, but I held my gaze anyway. “That’s where I’ve been all these years.”

Kartoff dropped my chin with a dismissive grunt. “As if a maid would be privy to such secrets . . .”

“Princess Opal told me!” I struggled to keep my voice from shaking. “I was not just her lady’s maid, but also her friend. She confided in me.”

Kartoff, however, merely scoffed. He turned to his men. “Proceed.”

“I can prove it! Look at my cloak—on the inside. It’s Princess Opal’s. She gave it to me for my journey, and she also sent her bravest, strongest knight to keep me safe.”

Kartoff whipped around to face me again, then scanned the opulent, emerald-green cloak around my shoulders. After a moment, he jerked his head toward me and both his henchmen abandoned their post by Bayne and stalked over. One of them yanked the cloak from my shoulders, then brought it to their leader. The cave air wrapped around me in a chilling embrace.

Kartoff examined the cloak, running his shrewd eyes and deft fingers over it, pausing on the inside where the emblem of Fernshire and Princess Opal’s title were stitched.

“How do I know you didn’t steal this?” Kartoff raised the cloak in his fist.

“If I had, do you think Fernshire’s most loyal knight would have accompanied me on my journey?” I lifted my chin toward Bayne, not missing the glare he shot me.

“Where is this cave you speak of?” Kartoff demanded, firing each question quicker than the last. “Why wouldn’t they guard the beast at the palace? And why would the princess tell you about it? Tell me the truth or I’ll have your knight whipped until every last drop of his blood stains this dirt!”

I sucked in a shaky breath, not willing to risk Bayne’s life by telling any more lies. “The dragon grew so rapidly that the king became concerned about keeping it at the castle. It was recently moved to a cave on the outskirts of the kingdom. Opal hated that her betrothed was away so much guarding it. She recruited my help as her chaperone to sneak off and see him.”

“Where is it?” Kartoff grabbed the back of my neck, his expression manic.

I squeezed my eyes shut, ignoring Bayne’s protests, and described the path from the palace I had taken with Opal as I saw it in my mind.

When I opened my eyes again, Kartoff's were gleaming, and a slow smile spread across his face.

"Very well." He released me with a satisfied grunt. "If you're privy to so many of Fernshire's secrets, then we'll take you with us on our expedition. If I find out you've lied to me, you and your knight will both face the consequences."

"I'm not lying."

"We shall see." Kartoff signaled his men. "We leave at dawn."

They all exited the cave, but once outside, Kartoff gave strict orders to his men about guarding us. I turned my attention to Bayne, surprised but relieved they had left without retying him to the stake. He sank to the ground on his knees, doubled over in pain.

"Are you all right?" I lifted my tied hands toward him.

"You shouldn't have told him that." Bayne's accusing eyes met mine, hard and bloodshot.

"I wasn't going to stand by and watch them kill you!" His ungratefulness was irksome.

"You should have." Bayne sat up on his knees. "I took an oath to protect Fernshire at the cost of my life. It's something I've been prepared to sacrifice since I was barely a man."

"You're not bound to Fernshire as a knight anymore," I whispered fiercely.

"I'm not saying I'm not grateful." Bayne snatched his shirt from the ground roughly, as if it pained him to admit it. "What I'm saying is you made the wrong choice—saving me will likely lead to countless innocent deaths. What do you suppose Kartoff will do with that beast if he gets his hands on it?"

"Nothing good." I swallowed thickly, then dropped my voice even quieter than before. "That's why we need to make sure he *doesn't* get his hands on it."

"And how are we supposed to do that?" Bayne shot back, venom in his tone. "You told him where they're keeping it."

"Kartoff is taking us along on his mission to capture it. Perhaps we can thwart him somehow—or warn Fernshire."

Bayne gave a derisive snort and lifted his shirt as if trying to figure out a way to put it back on with his wrists still tied.

“Don’t do that.” I raised my bound hands. “Your wounds need to be cleaned first or they’ll fester.”

“I don’t think Kartoff cares about the well-being of his prisoners.”

I ignored him and called for the guards.

“What?” One of Kartoff’s henchmen stalked inside and glared at me, no doubt angry that I had infringed on his torturous fun.

“This man’s wounds need to be tended to,” I said with authority. “I require bandages, salve, and hot water.”

The man laughed. “Kartoff won’t spare those things for a prisoner.”

“He will if he wants him to live to reach Fernshire. If infection sets in, this man will become delirious with a fever. Do as I say if you expect either of our cooperation.”

The man grumbled as he exited the cave, but not fifteen minutes later, he returned with my request.

“Untie me,” I demanded after he set a tray on the ground at my feet. But the man ignored me and stalked back to his post outside the cave.

With a sigh, I called to Bayne where he sat hunched, facing the corner. “You’ll have to come by me.”

Bayne grunted but complied, shuffling toward me because his ankles were still bound like his wrists. With his shirt twisted in his hands, he settled on his knees in front of me, then turned his injured back to me.

I knelt and faced him as much as the rope at my waist would allow, then grabbed a cloth and dipped it into the hot water.

“This will hurt before it feels better, I’m afraid,” I said, “but the most important thing is that we avoid an infection.”

“Thank you.” His words were more terse than grateful.

I set to work silently, first cleaning Bayne’s raw wounds with a rag and hot water. He recoiled against the sting and groaned a few times, but besides that, he didn’t complain.

After drying his back with a clean cloth, I set to work applying the salve. While I’d tended to many wounds as a healer in Tover, that was years ago, and my fingers were cumbersome with my wrists bound together.

As I spread the salve, Bayne’s well-developed back flexed against my touch.

“I’m sorry, I know it stings.” I didn’t expect a reply, but I always explained to my patients what I was doing when I tended to them. It set

them at ease. “But in a few minutes, it will start to dull the pain.” I wiped my hands on the cloth, cleaning the remaining salve and blood.

“It’s fine.” That was Bayne’s only response, almost as if acknowledging the pain was a weakness. Either way, distracting him with conversation was the best way to keep his mind off it.

And so, my words continued to flow. “I’m not sure if you’re the bravest man I’ve ever met or the most foolish . . . Kartoff would have killed you.”

“It would be an honor to die for the sake of my kingdom.” His words were stiff and mechanical as if he had told himself that many times over the years.

“And then what?” I asked. “Kartoff isn’t going to give up on whatever he has planned. There are other ways he can find the Jabberwock. At least if we’re there with him, we might be able to thwart him.”

Bayne stole a glance at me from behind his wide shoulder, as if measuring the sincerity of my words.

“What?” I paused in my task. Did he truly think I cared so little about the kingdom I’d left behind? “You are not the only one who’s concerned about the well-being of Fernshire. I have people I care about there.”

“Oh yes, I forgot you and the princess are such great friends.” His words were caustic, a clear reminder that he still thought ill of me for my deception.

“Just because I stole her horse doesn’t mean I wish her harm.”

Bayne set his jaw and I continued working. Getting this man to carry on a civil conversation was like pulling a splinter. The more I prodded, the angrier and more festered the area became. A wise person would let it be and hope the splinter worked its way out.

But I was not that wise person.

“Were you in love with her?” I asked, purposely picking the most intrusive question I could think of. He thought ill of me for using my position as Opal’s maid to my advantage? He was one to talk.

“Who?” He didn’t hide the disdain in his voice.

“Princess Opal.”

“No, of course not.” He glanced back at me again, dark brows furrowed, clearly aghast at the suggestion. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Quite a bit, wouldn’t you say?” I was perturbed by his dismissiveness. But at the same time, I wasn’t surprised. He was probably too practical to

believe in love.

“If you must know”—he sighed deeply—“it wasn’t my idea to marry the princess. It was King Nathanial’s. He was hardly any more impressed with the princess’s suitors than she was. If I had married her, it would have been to keep the kingdom of Fernshire safe. Few of those princes would have treated the people with the decency they deserve.”

“And you would have?”

“I’d like to think so, yes. I pledged my life in service as a knight and I would’ve done the same as the king.”

“And the power that came with it wasn’t at all tempting?” I scoffed. “Tell me, how does it feel knowing you lost the princess’s hand and a chance to be the ruler of Fernshire to a low-ranking knight?” I was baiting him, of course, but I had seen what the promise of power did to a man. The terrible things one justified in seeking it.

Bayne simply shrugged. “I’m happy for him. The knight Princess Opal is betrothed to is a good man, although inexperienced. But I have every confidence he will rule justly someday alongside his queen. And”—he shot me a meaningful glance, laced with a hint of humor—“I’m happy the princess is marrying someone she loves after all.”

I clamped my mouth shut, surprised by his words and even more surprised when he went on.

“Love rarely has a place in politics. But I’ll admit, it is a good thing for all involved when it finds a way, despite that.”

Love rarely has a place in politics . . .

How right he was.

I knew it all too well. I had once thought myself in love only to discover I was nothing but a disposable political pawn.

“You will need to help me with the next part,” I said, my words brusquer than I intended. “I need to wrap the bandages, but I’m bound too tightly to this stake to reach around you.” I pressed a strip of linen against the first of his wounds. “You’ll need to face me.”

Bayne shifted, turning toward me.

“Slower,” I commanded, pressing the bandage against the salve gently, but firmly enough so it would cover the wound and not shift. “Good.”

Once Bayne was facing me, I brought the bandage around to the front, using his shoulder as an anchor point, then tied it across his chest. I focused

on the knot, trying not to pay attention to his bare, muscular torso beneath my fingers. He certainly wasn't the first shirtless man I had tended to in my life, but he was the first who had made me feel so aware of his proximity.

I pressed my lips into a firm line, telling myself it was merely due to being out of practice as a healer and had nothing to do with the attractive sculpting of his chest and shoulders, or the hint of bronze in his skin—both testaments to his time spent training outdoors.

"Turn again, please," I said once the knot was secure, relieved at how clear and steady my voice sounded. Quite the opposite of how my heart faltered when I glanced up and found him watching me intently with his serious brown eyes.

Without a word, he complied. I set to work on the second wound on his back, tying the knot deftly when he turned to face me once more, and finally back again to the third wound.

As I secured the final knot, my eyes skimmed his torso, landing on the purple bruises along his abdomen. My finger brushed one lightly. "I'm sorry I don't have anything for these," I murmured. "Some comfrey would be helpful."

"It's fine." Bayne's deep voice came out surprisingly soft, his warm breath tickling my neck. "I can barely feel those with the pain in my back."

"Of course." I retracted my fingers, then tugged at the knot across his ribs. "Try to avoid any sudden movements so the bandages don't shift."

"Thank you." This time, his words sounded sincere.

My eyes lifted, meeting his, and the anger that had been there earlier was gone, replaced with a resigned softness and a hint of gratitude.

"You're welcome." I placed my hands in my lap and pulled back as far as my restraints would allow—which wasn't all that far. But now that my task was complete, our nearness felt peculiar.

As Bayne shifted away from me, I focused on cleaning up the remaining bandages and salve, putting them back on the tray neatly. Once finished, I glanced up to find him studying me.

"Perhaps I can untie you." He gestured to my bound wrists, his scrutinous gaze making sense.

"Oh." I glanced down at the tight knots below my hands. "Do you think you can?"

“It’s worth a try.” He eased toward me again, carefully, and I was glad he was heeding my words about being mindful of the bandages. Once at my side, he gently pulled my hands into his. His fingers immediately set to work, tugging at the rope at my wrists. His brow furrowed as he focused on the task. He was just as close as he had been when I tended his wounds, but now I had nothing to distract me. My gaze traveled down from his soft brown eyes squinting in the low light, to his strong bearded jaw, to his broad shoulders and muscular torso, still bare, save for the bandages crossing his chest.

I recalled how some of the maids at the Fernshire castle used to whisper and giggle about what a handsome knight he was and plot ways to earn his attention and affection. At the time, I’d never cast him a second glance, partially because I shared Princess Opal’s opinion of him and partially because I had no intention of ever being distracted in that way again. Now, however, it was impossible not to notice the man. And not just his physical qualities—his very presence commanded attention, both intimidating and comforting, a paradox in itself.

“It’s no use, I’m afraid.” Bayne dropped my hands, snapping my attention to the matter at hand. “The knots are too tight. These will need to be cut.”

“Let me try yours,” I said quickly, hoping setting myself to task would banish the ridiculous thoughts swirling in my brain.

And ridiculous they were. Noticing the man and harboring affection for him were two very different things. How could he not have captured my attention given our situation? It certainly didn’t mean I was in danger of entertaining whimsical fancies about him like the maids of Fernshire had. No, my heart was entirely safe, of that I was certain.

Bayne lifted his hands, obliging, and I turned my focus to searching for a loose spot in his bindings. But I soon found what he said to be true. The ropes were knotted too tightly for my fingers to grasp or loosen them.

“You’re right.” I gave up after a few moments. “I can’t free yours either.”

“The rope at your waist is larger and looser. I may be able to get that.” Bayne’s hands found their way to my waist, and I quickly pivoted, allowing him easier access to the knots, but also to turn my heated face away.

“It might not be worth the trouble.” My words came out a bit too loud as I tried to ignore the strange sensation of his fingers brushing against my

back. “They’ll likely just tie us both up again anyway.”

“They’ve got us completely guarded in here,” Bayne said softly in my ear. “They might not bother . . . I think I’ve got it. Hold still.”

I glanced over my shoulder, catching sight of his fingers working deftly, surprisingly adept given how large his hands were. Within seconds, the rope around my waist loosened and dropped to the ground.

“Thank you,” I said with another quick glance over my shoulder as I moved away, grateful to be free of both the stake and him.

“Don’t mention it.” Task completed, he barely glanced at me as he retreated to his spot in the corner.

No longer restrained at the waist, I stretched. “Now what?”

Bayne lowered himself gingerly to the dirt floor, then turned onto his side, pulling his discarded cloak over himself. “They said we leave at dawn.” He bunched up his shirt beneath his head as a pillow. “We should get some rest.”

I nodded, feeling suddenly exhausted. I lay down on the hard floor and spread my fingers, resting my head on my bound hands. I wished I still had the cloak Kartoff had taken from me. I thought about calling the guard and demanding it back, or at least a blanket, but I worried they’d tie us up again. With Bayne’s wounds, he deserved to be as comfortable as possible. And I’d rather be cold and free than warm and bound.

So I closed my eyes and eventually drifted into a fitful sleep.

Chapter 5
- BAYNE -

I rarely slept well these days, tormented by memories of my time spent trapped in the shadows of my mind, but tonight was especially difficult.

I drifted in and out of sleep, nightmares plaguing my unconsciousness and pain plaguing my moments awake.

On what felt like my hundredth time jarring into consciousness, a strange noise caught my attention, rousing my weary mind even more.

It was a rhythmic chattering, and when I sat up, I saw a blurry shape shaking in the darkness.

Alice—no, that wasn't right. My fuzzy mind came into focus. That wasn't really her name. Aviva.

Her breath came out in ragged gusts, clouding in the air, and she curled into herself. I shifted toward her. I mentally cursed myself as I recalled Kartoff had taken her cloak. I should have remembered sooner that she was without it. Now that night had fallen, it was freezing in the cave.

I quickly pulled my cloak from my shoulders and draped it across her shivering body. "Take this."

She sat up and grabbed my hand, stopping my retreat to the corner. "I c-can't. You n-need it. You're hurt."

"I'll be fine," I said and meant it. I was twice her size and used to sleeping in the elements. I gave her ice-cold hand a reassuring squeeze. "Take the cloak."

"We c-can share it."

"No." I shook my head. "Your honor—"

Her sharp laugh turned to a cough. "My honor is the least of my concerns right now." She held the cloak out to me. "We share or you take it back. You're the one at risk for a fever."

I exhaled an irate breath. That might have been so, but she was just as likely to develop a fever if she continued shivering the way she was.

“Very well.” There wasn’t much honor in letting a woman freeze to death either. If one of us fell sick, it would make stopping Kartoff that much harder. I grabbed the cloak and spread it across her as she lay back down, then I inched toward her and settled myself underneath it as well.

She pressed her back against my bandaged chest. “You’re even warmer than your cloak.”

The feel of her cold body against me was enough to make me reconsider my boundaries. She was freezing. It was apparent even through the sturdy material of her traveling gown. I laid my bound arms across her waist and pulled her closer, the cloak now covering us both adequately.

“Get some rest,” I said softly in her ear.

“You too.”

That wasn’t likely, but I was relieved when her tremors slowed and then stopped.

And eventually, my eyes grew heavy from listening to her soft, rhythmic breathing, and sleep claimed me too.

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I awoke with a groan, protesting the stinging in my back. Was I sleeping on a bed of nails?

I blinked, memories returning of all that occurred the day before. The capture. My torture. And the stubborn, foolhardy woman who had ended it.

The same woman who was now nestled in my arms, fast asleep.

I blinked again, thinking this must be some strange dream. But no, I recalled how I had awoken last night to her freezing, and we had reached a compromise of sharing my cloak. A wise move, for apparently, we had both slept soundly and staved off fever.

But as I took note of her curves pressed against me—and my arms draped across her waist as if shielding her from harm—our proximity seemed less practical and more intimate.

I couldn’t deny that I liked the feel of her nestled against my chest. And as I blinked the sleep from my vision, I couldn’t help but appreciate the

sight of her tousled hair falling across her shoulder and her pink lips almost smiling, while her chest rose and fell in rhythm with her breaths.

The memory of her gentle fingers trailing along my bare skin yesterday came to the center of my mind. Yesterday, the sensation had been dulled by pain, but now, I yearned to feel her soft caress again.

I shut my eyes and banished the thought. Not only was it completely inappropriate, it was completely misguided. There was no fondness between this woman and me. While we may have come to a reluctant truce, the only thing we truly shared was the unfortunate situation we found ourselves in. And although she had saved my life, she had likely done so at the expense of the entire kingdom of Fernshire.

Moreover, she had lied to me. She was a woman with secrets—a criminal, even—perhaps involved with worse things than stealing a horse and a cloak.

I could not allow myself to be taken in by her. All I could do was try to keep her safe throughout this ordeal. Fernshire was my main concern.

With my thoughts firmly back in order, I eased away from Aviva, lifting my arms and sliding out from under the cloak. She stirred slightly but settled when I tucked the fabric around her again.

I blew into my bound hands, warming them in the cool morning air. Low voices sounded from outside the cave, and the bustle of activity meant the men were already preparing for our travels. Past the bulk of the two guards at the entrance, I spotted a man dragging a cart of live chickens behind him. Another man tugged a large sheep and a few goats along by leads around their necks.

A few moments later, Aviva stirred. She brushed her hair out of her face and sat up.

“Thank you again,” she said, holding my cloak out to me. If she was embarrassed by what had passed between us last night, she didn’t show it.

“Keep it.” I gave a nod and turned back to the entrance. There was still a chill in the early morning air.

Several hours later, Aviva and I found ourselves chained together at the waist in a large wooden wagon with bars, being transported back to Fernshire.

What a way to return to my former kingdom—in a cage.

Not that anyone would likely see me in this state, for the wagon had been covered by several large tarps, only slivers of light flashing as the coverings swayed from the jarring of the bumpy road.

“I’ve been thinking,” Aviva said beside me, her voice low. My cloak was fastened around her shoulders, practically engulfing her. “That we need a plan for when we get to Fernshire.”

“For staying alive and keeping our kingdom safe?” I couldn’t help but quip. “Trust me, I’ve been thinking about it. Can’t say I’ve come up with a solution . . .” I shifted, taking care not to press my injured back against the bars of the wagon. I was lucky to have the bandages protecting my wounds and that the guards had allowed me to slip my tunic back on before they transferred us.

“Do you think Kartoff means to kill us once we get there?”

“Once we’ve exhausted our value to him, yes.” I glanced at the ceiling of our dark jail. “What do you think this cage is for?”

“You mean besides us?” Aviva looked around the dark space as if it might give her a clue.

“Kartoff wants the monster. I’d say this is how he plans to transport it after he captures it.” I shot her a wry look. “Meaning there won’t be room for us on the journey back . . . And even if there was, I wouldn’t want to share a space with that beast.”

“So if Kartoff won’t kill us as long as we’re valuable to him, we need to convince him that he needs us to gain access to the Jabberwock. We need him to let us out of here.” Her voice dropped even lower, so much that I had to lean closer to catch her words over the rumble of the wheels beneath us. “Then we need to find a way to stop him.”

“How? It’s not as if he’s going to give us a weapon.”

Aviva smoothed her skirt. “Luckily, I have a knack for finding the perfect opportunity for taking what doesn’t belong to me.”

“Yes, I recall.” I snorted. “Not sure that’s working out for you at the moment though.”

She lifted her chin. “I’m still alive, aren’t I?”

I had to give her that, but what I said was, “For now.”

She didn’t respond, merely set her jaw stubbornly and turned away from me as if she were gazing out at the scenery and not a dull canvas tarp.

“Speaking of staying alive,” I went on, “you never did tell me why King Abrax ordered Kartoff to kill you. Or how you survived.”

“I did tell you,” she insisted, still not meeting my gaze. “He realized I was a threat to his ill-gotten throne and decided disposing of me was the best option.”

“What could a village healer possibly have over a king, even a false one? What aren’t you telling me? Did you steal from him too?”

“No.” Finally, her eyes met mine and they looked as if they could cut me like sharp steel. “I didn’t steal from him.”

I opened my mouth to question her further, but she beat me to it.

“You may as well save your breath because I have nothing more to say to you about it. My association with Abrax has nothing to do with why Kartoff captured us. His only interest in me—and you, for that matter—is because of the Fernshire beast.”

I shut my mouth. Not because I wanted to let the subject rest, but because of the question that hit me at her words.

Was she right? Despite Kartoff’s past association with her, if his only interest in her now was the Fernshire beast, then would she even be in this predicament if our paths had never crossed?

I recalled how surprised Kartoff had been to see her in the forest. He’d truly believed her to be dead. But me, on the other hand, he was not surprised to see. He knew exactly who I was. Had Kartoff been tracking me since I’d left Fernshire, or longer, waiting for the perfect opportunity to capture me and torture me into giving him the information he wanted about the Jabberwock?

I glanced at Aviva, guilt prickling in my chest. She studied her hands, deep in thought. Her brow furrowed, as if whatever those thoughts were, they caused her much pain.

If I hadn’t insisted on traveling with her, would she be free right now? Probably. And I’d also probably be dead—or wishing I was—if she hadn’t been there to put a stop to Kartoff’s torture.

Gratitude rose in me—and a bit of shame when I recalled how thankless I’d behaved toward her yesterday. Yes, I would have preferred to die with honor for the sake of my kingdom, but who’s to say I would have? I’d heard tales of stronger men than I succumbing to torture. I likely owed this woman more than I realized.

I released a long, slow breath. My questions about her past could wait. Regardless of the whys and what-ifs, we needed to deal with the here and now. Which meant getting along and coming up with a plan.

Leaning toward her, I murmured, “So what kind of plan did you have in mind? We aren’t going to have much to work with.”

Her gaze flew to mine, surprise replacing the pain that had been there. After a moment, she whispered, “Yesterday, in the cave, Kartoff asked you to tell him the secret of controlling the monster. Do you really know?”

“Yes.” Although to be honest, I wished I didn’t. “But I’m not going to tell you, so don’t ask.”

“I wasn’t going to.” She narrowed her eyes at me as if once again affronted that I didn’t trust her. Which was true, but I also didn’t want Kartoff trying to torture the information out of her. She went on. “But I think you can use that to our advantage. Tell him something false, or at least tell him he needs to take you to the dragon to do it.”

She wasn’t wrong. But there were also a million things that could go wrong with a plan like that. Namely, if Kartoff caught us feeding him false information, he’d likely torture us both. I may have been prepared to risk it, but I wasn’t willing to subject Aviva to it. I didn’t want to trick Kartoff; I wanted to get her as far away from him as possible.

“It would be better if we could get away before we even reach the monster,” I said. “If we could just get to Fernshire first to warn the king . . .” I paused and did my best to peek out a small slit in the wagon covering, trying to place where we were. “We’re heading toward the caves . . . we’ll pass by the lake eventually—if we could escape, perhaps we could swim across, then head to the palace.”

Aviva shook her head. “I can’t swim.”

There went that plan.

“If we do reach the monster,” I said, “there’s something very important I want you to remember. Whatever you do, do not look in the Jabberwock’s eyes.”

“Why not?” Interest lit up her gaze.

“They’re powerful.” I hoped she would heed my words without asking too many questions. While I wasn’t prepared to tell her how to control the Jabberwock, I was going to at least tell her how to stay safe. “They’re what

caused me to get trapped in . . .” I searched for the right word, but she finished for me.

“Madness?”

“Yes.” I suppose that covered it.

“Very well.” Aviva nodded. “Thank you for telling me. Wait—” She tilted her head to the side, eyes alight once more. “Does Kartoff know that?”

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A few days later, our wagon rolled to a stop, the gravel ceasing to crunch underneath its massive wheels, and I strained to listen for any clue that could tell me where we were.

“Who goes there?” came a distant cry, and based on the exchange that followed, I realized we had arrived at the Fernshire kingdom’s outer gates.

“’Tis the livestock for the royal wedding feast,” one of Kartoff’s men replied.

I caught Aviva’s eye, and although neither of us could speak because we had both been gagged by Kartoff’s men the last time the group stopped, the look she gave me told me that she was just as aware of Kartoff’s plan as I was.

They were posing as livestock farmers to gain access to the outer kingdom. That explained the sheep, goats, and chickens I had seen earlier. And no one would look twice at the bulky covered wagon we rode in. They’d simply assume it contained more livestock.

Kartoff had picked the perfect opportunity to sneak into Fernshire and capture the beast. With the royal wedding scheduled to take place in a few days, his group could pose as farmers responding to the need to supply for the wedding feast. Also, no one would pay strangers any mind when there were so many guests arriving for the royal wedding. Not only that, but Kartoff probably also planned to use the meat to feed the dragon once he captured it.

After a quick exchange between Kartoff’s man and the guard, we were ushered forward. Now that we were through the outer Fernshire kingdom

gates, we rode for a time again. When we finally stopped, I had no doubt we had ridden to the caves, close to where Aviva had revealed the monster was being hidden.

The flap covering our wagon lifted, and a guard unlocked the barred door.

“We’re here.” Kartoff climbed in and cut both our gags. “Now let me tell you how this is going to work. You”—he pointed to Aviva—“are going to lead me to the caves where the beast is being held. And *you*”—he pointed to me—“are going to control the monster for me and lead it into this carriage.”

“And if I refuse?” I asked.

“Then we’ll pick up where we left off the other day.” He clamped a rough hand onto Aviva’s hair, pulling her head up so her wide eyes were looking right at me. “Only it won’t be you I’ll torture. It will be *her.*” He let her head drop and chuckled. “I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before. A knight like you wouldn’t be able to bear a damsel in distress.” His determined eyes met mine. “Am I understood?”

My suspicions had been correct. And as much as I hated bending to this vile man’s manipulation, I was going to do everything in my power to keep him from hurting Aviva. “You are.”

Not long after, Aviva and I stood outside the cave where the dragon was being held. The handful of Fernshire guards that were stationed outside had been no match for Kartoff’s men—and not because they had attacked them by surprise. No, their method had been simple. One of Kartoff’s men had disguised himself as a servant from the Fernshire palace and had brought the knights their midday meal. Within minutes, they were all slumped upon the ground, passed out.

“I took a page from your book,” Kartoff said to Aviva, a smug grin on his face. “A sleeping remedy. When these fools awake and find the beast gone, there will be no sign of who took it. They may even think it escaped—much more efficient than a messy battle.”

Two of Kartoff’s men pulled Aviva away, holding her with a knife to her side.

“Now you are going to deliver the dragon to me,” Kartoff said to me. “And remember, if there is any trickery on your part, she’ll pay the price and it won’t be pretty.” He jerked his head toward Aviva. On cue, one of the

guards pulled a length of rope around her throat and yanked it taut. She clawed at it with her bound hands, her eyes bulging.

“Are you mad?” I lunged toward her, but Kartoff’s men held me back. “She can’t breathe!”

“Then do your job.”

I gritted my teeth as I struggled against Kartoff’s men, but I was far outnumbered. I’d never reach her in time. The guard loosened the rope around her neck just long enough for her to suck in a hoarse breath, then he squeezed again, his taunting eyes fixed on me.

“Stop!” I cried again, useless as it was. Every move Aviva made struggling for her life felt like a kick to my gut. While I’d hoped to avoid succumbing to Kartoff’s threats, I had no choice. It was one thing to resign myself to torture, but I wasn’t going to force Aviva to endure it.

I ceased struggling and turned to Kartoff. “I need a looking glass.”

“A looking glass?” Kartoff eyed me dubiously. “You’d better not be toying with me.”

“I’m not! That’s the only way to look at the beast safely.”

One of Kartoff’s guards spoke up. “Sir, we found a looking glass on one of the Fernshire knights we drugged.”

“Very well.” Kartoff raised a hand and the man choking Aviva loosened his grip. She coughed and gasped, her knees buckling, but the guards held her upright.

Within moments, one of Kartoff’s men returned with a handheld looking glass, large enough for me to see my entire face and neck in its reflection.

I took it wordlessly and held my arms out for Kartoff’s man to slice the ropes at my wrists. Once free, I strode toward the cave, casting one last glance at Aviva, who was breathing steadily again, although the guards had her in a tight grip. Kartoff and his men followed close behind me.

Once at the cave’s entrance, the guards stopped. I turned around, raised the mirror, and used it to guide me. Slowly, I stepped backward into the deep cave.

It was a huge space, the ceiling stretching high above me. Torches on the wall lit the area, casting light on large boulders dotted around the cave, which created eerie shadows upon the cave walls and ground.

My tread was slow and careful, but before long, I caught sight of the monster in my looking glass, chained up to the far wall, much larger than

when I’d last seen it.

A fabric blindfold was wrapped around its eyes. And although that dangerous feature was covered, it didn’t make the dragon any less fearsome. The Jabberwock’s long neck protruded from its giant scaled body, wings spread at its side, talon-clawed feet scratching in the dirt.

I took another step. It whipped its head toward me with an angry snort and a snap of its jaw.

I stopped.

“We have a problem,” I called out to Kartoff.

“And what is that?”

“Its eyes are covered.”

“So?”

“I need to see its eyes to control it, but it’s not safe to uncover its eyes if it’s not within my control.”

Kartoff grumbled, threatened me again if I wasn’t telling him the truth, then issued a command to his men.

One of Kartoff’s men joined me in the cave. He raised his bow, took aim, and his arrow went flying. It landed through the knot of the blindfold at the side of the Jabberwock’s head. The dragon flinched and snarled, clearly not appreciating the sudden movement. Attached to the arrow was a rope, which the man handed to me before he exited the cave.

Swallowing slowly, I adjusted my grip on the mirror with one hand, fixing the Jabberwock in my sight in it. With the other, I tugged the rope, pulling the blindfold from the dragon’s eyes.

It shrieked in confusion, or perhaps anger, then its gaze locked with mine in the looking glass. Its reflection eyes blinked back at me, so innocent, although I knew if I were to face them without a mirror, they had the power to destroy my mind and suck me back to a land of confusion and madness.

“Be still,” I commanded the monster.

The beast cocked its head and then it obeyed, laying its long neck on the cave floor.

“Close your eyes.”

Again, the Jabberwock obeyed.

“Your men can unchain it now,” I called to Kartoff, my shoulders tight and my gut twisting. The dragon was subdued but the real threat was outside this cave.

Had I made the wrong choice in complying with Kartoff's commands in order to save Aviva? How many other innocent lives would Kartoff destroy if he gained control of the Jabberwock? Had I just doomed the kingdom?

Kartoff barked an order. There was a rustle of movement, the jangle of keys, and then Aviva stepped through the cave entrance. She was flanked by two men holding her bound arms, their swords pressed at her side.

"So you don't get any ideas," Kartoff called to me. "*She'll* be right in front of it when they unchain the monster."

Aviva's eyes were wide when they met mine. Kartoff wasn't allowing us to trick him, putting Aviva in harm's way so I wouldn't be inclined to use the beast against him. I gave her a slight nod, telling her it was all right. That we'd find another way. While we had planned to get Kartoff in front of the dragon, now was not our opportunity.

Aviva passed by me slowly, held tight by the guards. Her hands trembled slightly and her eyes were downcast, but her footsteps were sure. The beast kept its jaw to the ground, its eyes closed.

Whatever you do, I mentally pleaded with Aviva, although she couldn't hear me, *don't look it in the eyes.* I prayed she would heed my warning from the wagon.

One guard stopped her, holding her directly in front of the dragon, essentially using her as a shield. The other guard slowly knelt, and with a lock pick, unlocked one, two, then three shackles. It was free.

"Keep the girl in front of the beast as you bring it out," Kartoff commanded his men.

At his words, I saw my chance.

"Look at me," I commanded the monster.

It opened its eyes and met mine in the mirror.

"Don't harm the girl," I commanded. "Attack the men."

With a fierce shriek, the Jabberwock obeyed. It charged forward and snapped one of the men between its mighty jaws.

He barely had time to scream before the beast devoured him. Aviva and the other guard stumbled and sprawled onto the ground. The man scrambled on all fours to get away, but the dragon raised its sharp talons and slashed his back. He collapsed, his blood pooling beneath him.

"No!" Kartoff raced toward me with his sword drawn. I lunged to the side, narrowly avoiding his blade as it sliced through the air, clanging

against a nearby boulder.

“Give me that!” Kartoff caught my wrist, and the mirror flew from my grasp, shattering into pieces upon the ground.

“No, no.” Kartoff fell to his knees and scooped up a handful of broken shards. But they were useless. Too small to make eye contact with the beast and control it.

Still, Kartoff lifted a pathetic sliver the size of his thumb. “I command you—”

The dragon lunged at him, snapping its brutish jaw, but Kartoff leaped behind a boulder just in time. The useless mirror shard fell at his feet in the dirt. The Jabberwock snarled and plodded toward the massive rocks where Kartoff had concealed himself.

With the Jabberwock focused on Kartoff, I too snatched up a piece of the broken mirror and raced toward Aviva. “We need to hide.” I grabbed her hand and pulled her behind another boulder and began sawing at the ropes around her wrists with the broken glass.

“Can’t you control it like before?” she asked, lifting her now-free hands.

I shook my head and tossed the useless shard on the ground. “Not without the mirror.” I was no longer in control, and Aviva was no longer immune to its bloodlust.

Crouched behind our boulder, I watched Kartoff silently climb atop a rock as the Jabberwock weaved in and out of the stone formations, searching for him.

It was only a matter of time before the Jabberwock spotted him. And us.

Kartoff must have realized it too. When the Jabberwock was directly beneath him, he leaped from the rock, landing on the Jabberwock’s back, then plunged his sword into its large body.

It was a good strike, but not a death blow. Although, perhaps Kartoff only wanted to hinder the monster and not kill it.

Foolish man.

The Jabberwock shrieked and tossed its head, rising on its hind legs in response to the pain.

With a bellow, Kartoff crashed to the ground, his skull cracking against a rock. His sword remained buried in the Jabberwock’s back, blood forming around the wound, but not enough for the dragon to bleed out.

And in its pain, it was enraged.

Kartoff groaned, then lifted his head—and that was his mistake.

The Jabberwock sensed his movement and it turned toward him. In an instant, it towered over him, snarling and tilting its head to one side.

But it didn't go in for the kill. It didn't need to.

Kartoff blinked, and when his gaze met the monster's, his eyes widened, then immediately glazed over.

The Jabberwock had him under its spell.

Kartoff sat up straighter, preparing to sacrifice himself to the beast, now that he was under its command.

"*'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves,*" he mumbled, *"did gyre and gimble in the wabe . . .*"

"What's he doing?" Aviva whispered fiercely next to me, no doubt baffled that Kartoff wasn't even attempting to get away.

"He looked in the Jabberwock's eyes," I said. "He's under its control now. It's one of the ways the beast hunts. It gets its prey to sacrifice themselves to it. Look away. You aren't going to want to see this." Kartoff's brutal death was mere seconds away.

I didn't heed my own words and I doubted Aviva did either. I was transfixed in horror as the dragon opened its mighty jaw, preparing to devour Kartoff, a willing lamb to the slaughter.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!" Kartoff continued to recite the nonsensical poem the way I once had.

But before he uttered another word, arrows flew into the Jabberwock's back, landing in a haphazard circle around Kartoff's lodged sword.

The beast screamed and snorted, then whipped its head around, spotting a handful of Kartoff's men as they retreated from the cave entrance.

"*He took his vorpal sword in hand . . .*" Kartoff rattled on, oblivious that his life had just been spared—for now. "*Long time the manxome foe he sought—*"

The Jabberwock would be back for him, but he was subdued quarry now. The dragon's attention was on the threat outside the cave.

The Jabberwock charged from the cave, while Aviva and I watched on in horror. Once clear of the entrance, it flapped its mighty wings, circling Kartoff's men. They dispersed, shoving each other and screaming, but they didn't stand a chance. One by one, the beast swooped down, tearing them apart, then devouring them.

“What are we going to do?” Aviva asked beside me. “We can’t let that thing go free.”

“I don’t know.” I racked my brain trying to think. A broken mirror hadn’t been part of the plan. We were momentarily hidden from the dragon, but we had no weapons and it would be back.

“The palace.” Aviva gasped.

My throat went dry, finishing her thought. “Once it finishes off everyone here, it will head there.”

“All those people . . . We need to do something.”

She was right. I needed to go out there and fight the beast, useless as it would probably be. This was the moment I’d been training for almost my entire life. Now was the time to sacrifice myself for my kingdom.

I knew it, but my limbs didn’t move. It wasn’t because I feared death—no, I’d come to terms with that years ago.

It was the alternative the Jabberwock offered. Not death, but madness. Wandering alone in a land designed to trick and torment. I’d endured it once before and I wasn’t sure I could again. I dropped my head in my trembling hands, telling myself I could. Telling myself I needed to be the knight I had always striven to be, no matter the cost.

But before I could act, Aviva did. She leaped up and rushed out of the cave.

“Aviva, don’t!” I called after her.

“I have to.”

And then she was gone.

With a frustrated groan, I hurried after her.

“*One, two! One, two! And through and through,*” Kartoff’s voice rang out behind me, oblivious of the carnage that had just befallen his men. “*The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!*”

I had just crossed the cave’s entrance when Aviva plucked a fallen dagger and slid it into her belt, then she snatched a sword from the ground. She turned toward the beast, nothing else between her and it. Nothing between its eyes and hers if it were to face her.

“Aviva, stop!” I yelled, grabbing a sword from the carnage.

She didn’t heed me. Instead, she charged at the dragon and plunged the sword into its side, so deep only the hilt protruded from its scaly body. The beast released an ear-piercing shriek as it tossed its long neck, striking

Aviva in the process. She flew backward, crashing to the ground, then scrambled to right herself, but the dragon was after her.

In its rage, the Jabberwock snarled and gnashed its teeth, blood dripping from the wound she had given it.

As terrifying as its mighty jaws were, I knew that wasn't all Aviva should fear from this monster.

"Aviva, close your eyes!" I raced toward her.

But it was too late. Aviva's eyes widened as she faced the dragon, her gaze connecting with its own.

And I saw it all.

The way her eyes blinked, then glazed over.

The dazed look that stole across her features.

The calm way she picked her bruised body off the ground and limped toward the Jabberwock, under its spell, ready to sacrifice her life to it.

"No, Aviva! Stop!" Just as she approached the beast's bloodthirsty jaws, I reached it, driving my sword into its neck, pinning it to the ground. I pulled Aviva into my arms, yanking her away.

We stumbled to the ground. "Aviva, look at me," I begged as I took her face into my hands. "Look at me!" But it was no use. The eyes that stared back at me were vacant. And the words she muttered were the same ones that were seared into my brain.

"'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves . . . did gyre and gimble in the wabe . . ."

"No." I could barely choke the word out. "You shouldn't have . . ."

She didn't answer, and I knew she couldn't hear me. Her body was here, in my arms, but her mind was somewhere else. Somewhere far away. Somewhere far more terrible.

I set her gently on the ground and turned to face the monster. Still pinned, a huge pool of blood poured from the wounds Aviva and I had made. It barely lifted its head from the earth, its eyelids fluttering as it snorted heavy breaths. I looked from the beast to the small pieces of the shattered mirror on the ground a few feet away.

Aviva's only chance of returning to sanity, useless and broken. There wasn't time for me to try to find another one. There wasn't time for anything.

“Sir Bayne,” a weary voice called to me. “What . . . happened? How did the beast attack?”

I turned and saw one of the Fernshire knights that Kartoff’s men had drugged, blinking back at me from behind a boulder. He must have woken up amidst the chaos. Stanton was his name—I knew him well.

“Some men were trying to capture the beast.” I gestured to the weakened Jabberwock dying before our eyes. “The group’s leader is still alive. He’s in the cave, but he fell to the Jabberwock’s curse. You must restrain him. Take him back to Fernshire and lock him in the dungeon.”

“The others?” Stanton asked, but his eyes confirmed their fate when he saw the bloody scene spread out before us.

“They fell to the Jabberwock.”

“How—” Stanton turned from the bloodshed, composing himself like the steady knight he was. “How did you come to be involved in all of this?”

“They captured me and this woman to help them, due to our connection to Fernshire. We thwarted them, and Aviva”—my voice cracked—“she sacrificed herself to stop the dragon from attacking Fernshire.”

“Who is she?” Stanton asked.

It was a question I couldn’t answer, for I didn’t truly know.

“Someone Fernshire owes a great debt to,” I replied. “Stanton, send word to the palace immediately. Alert the king. Tell him all that has happened here.”

Stanton nodded and began to relay information to his fellow knights who had also started to awake.

“Stanton,” I called again, once he had finished imparting orders to the other knights. “I need you to do one more thing for me.”

“Anything, Sir Bayne.” Stanton nodded, still loyal to me even though I was no longer his commanding officer.

“See that Princess Opal’s horse is returned to her.” I pointed to Cleopatra, who was tied up at a tree beside Abbott amongst the other horses Kartoff’s group had ridden here on.

“Yes, sir.”

“And I need you to make sure this woman and I are cared for in Fernshire.”

“Of course.” Another nod and then a look of confusion crossed Stanton’s face. “Wait—and you?”

I didn’t answer because there was no time to explain. I turned away from him and gazed at the broken woman beside me muttering nonsense to herself. I didn’t truly know who she was, but I did know she was now a shell of who she had been.

She had saved hundreds of lives through her actions today. She’d acted when I’d failed to. She was a heroine and the world would never know. They’d only know her as a madwoman from here on out.

There was only one thing I could do. Only one way I could aid her in the terrible place she now found herself. Only one way I could ease my guilt over the fact that I’d hesitated and let her do what I should have.

I turned my back to her.

I took a step toward the beast and knelt in front of it, gripping the hilt of my sword at its neck to give myself strength.

Then I lifted my gaze and stared into the eyes of the dying Jabberwock.

Chapter 6
- AVIVA -

Although my eyes were closed, my head spun and my ears rang. My body prickled as if I lay on shattered glass.

I gasped and opened my eyes, staring up at a wide burnt-red sky.

Slowly sitting up, I blinked, looking around.

Where was I?

It was a dark forest. But not nighttime. No, although it was dim, the sky shone a hazy red in between patches of gray clouds.

Lightning flashed, igniting a tree branch above me. A fierce wind shook the leaves, which were stark black, not a vibrant, healthy green.

What was this place? I scrambled to my knees, crushing brittle gray leaves beneath me. I yanked the dagger from my belt, preparing for an impending battle. Only then did I notice that the blue traveling dress I'd been wearing was now a pure white.

A rustling and a nearby groan caused me to whip around. I struggled to stand on shaky legs, fearing the worst. Fearing that the dragon I had faced moments ago was here with me. Had it snatched me in its jaws and flown me to this dark land?

The shadow shifted and stood.

I gasped.

"Bayne?"

Another groan. He swiped a hand across his forehead. Then his eyes cleared and fixed on me.

"Aviva?" He took a stumbling step toward me. "You're here?" His hand brushed my arm, then he squeezed my shoulders. "I found you? Tell me I'm not imagining you."

"I'm here." I nodded, trying to reassure him, although there wasn't anything I felt sure of right now. I studied him just as he studied me. He was the same as I remembered, only now his gray hunting tunic and pants

were a crisp white. It made him look almost ghostly, except for the black leather belted sheath at his waist. However, his grip on my arm was firm and real.

"Where *are* we?" I asked.

"I'm not sure if there's a name for it." Bayne released me, although he seemed reluctant to. He stepped back, gazing overhead. "Ah yes." His eyes focused on something. "That was there last time . . . The Tulgey Wood."

"Last time? You mean—" My words died in my throat as I spun around, glancing every which way until I spied a crude, crooked wooden sign hanging from one of the dark trees, declaring this forest to be *The Tulgey Wood*.

I stared at it. "Tulgey? What does that even mean?"

"I don't know." Bayne shrugged. "But I came to think it meant dark and dense. Perhaps endless would be a more accurate term . . . or even torturous."

"We're here, aren't we?" I swallowed thickly. "The place you were when you . . . went mad?"

Bayne nodded. "I'm afraid so."

I blew out a shaky breath. "This is it—where you were trapped all that time? This is what you saw?"

Another nod.

"But how . . ."

"I'm not entirely sure. All I know is, while our physical bodies have remained in Fernshire, our minds have been transported here. There, we will seem to have gone quite mad, but here, we're very much aware."

"How is it possible?"

"What's the last thing you remember?"

I shook my head, trying to recall. "Racing toward the monster, stabbing it, and then . . ."

"Looking in its eyes," Bayne finished for me.

I squeezed my eyes shut. "I should have listened to you . . . I should have been more careful." My words died away. My life was nothing but a long series of "should haves." Little good they did me now. My only consolation was the memory of the blow I'd given the Jabberwock with my sword. "What about the beast?"

"It's dead." Admiration filled Bayne's tone. "You stopped it."

I released a sigh of relief. It may have cost me my mind, but I'd accomplished what I'd set out to do.

"But how did you end up here?" I asked Bayne. It didn't make sense. He of all people knew how to avoid the Jabberwock's curse. He'd warned me, but I'd been too impetuous to truly heed him.

"Come on." Bayne turned his back to me and began trudging through the trees. "It's not safe for us to stay in one place too long."

"Bayne, answer me." I hurried after him, yanking on his arm, forcing him to face me. "How did you come to be here too? Or are you not even real? Am I imagining you?"

"No, I assure you, I am very real—as real as anything can be in this place." His gaze flashed to the trees above us, then returned to mine and held. "I *am* with you. That much is certain. We're trapped here, but at least you're not trapped here alone."

"I don't understand—" And then it hit me. "Wait—you *chose* this? You chose to come back here?"

"You saved my life, remember? From Kartoff. And now I—well, I'll try to save yours. I can't promise I'll succeed. But now we're even."

His words were calm. Resigned. The opposite of mine, as so many emotions bubbled to the surface. Surprise. Fear. Appreciation. But mainly, anger.

Only now did I fully understand Bayne's ire when I'd stopped Kartoff from torturing him. I hadn't understood when he'd said it wasn't worth the price. But now that our roles were reversed, I did.

"You shouldn't have." My words were raw and harsh. "You shouldn't have come after me. Of all the foolish things to do!"

"I couldn't leave you to face this on your own." His tone turned frustrated. "Not knowing what I know. Besides, you saved Fernshire—the entire kingdom. You acted when I should have. I froze. I was a coward—"

"You weren't a coward! You were assessing the situation. I should have listened to you and waited. Come up with a plan of attack—"

"The Jabberwock could have turned its sights on the kingdom at any moment! You made the right choice, Aviva." He paused, his next words coming out pained and full of regret. "The choice I should have made. And after . . . it was only right for me to try to help you."

“You shouldn’t have. You don’t understand . . .” My words fell to a whisper as I shook my head. “I’m not worth saving.”

Bayne stared at me, confusion in his eyes. But when he finally opened his mouth, his retort never came. He was cut off by a ferocious roar and a cracking of branches—so powerful the black leaves and the boughs above us shook.

We both turned our gazes to the forest and the sight through the scraggly branches made my heart drop.

A beast, unlike anything I had ever seen before. It charged at us with the fluidity of a wolf, but its claws were much longer, almost like sharp fingers coming off its massive paws. And it was huge, its hulking body resembling a bear, except with spiked fur running the length of its back.

With a long snout like a boar and giant curling tusks, its face was especially grotesque. It roared again, a terrible din, like a low, blaring trumpet, and then it licked its lips, revealing long sharp teeth. Snorting angrily, it released a puff of fire from its nostrils, singeing the trees in its path.

“Run!” Bayne grabbed my hand and tugged me through the trees. My feet responded, racing after him, although my mind was still trying to process the creature I’d just seen.

“What was that?” I asked between panting breaths.

“A Bandersnatch.”

“A what?” I’d never heard of such a creature. And I certainly didn’t want to be snatched by it.

“That’s what I named it”—Bayne picked up the pace—“last time.”

“Can it hurt us?” I gasped, struggling to keep up with Bayne’s long strides. “Aren’t our bodies . . . back in Fernshire?”

“I have scars from my last journey here that proves it can.”

“So if we die here . . . ?” Out of breath, I couldn’t quite finish my question, or perhaps I didn’t want to.

But Bayne finished it for me. “Then we die there—I assume, anyway.”

I ran harder, not daring to stop. I didn’t want to test his theory out. We may have been here in our minds, but it seemed we were still linked to our bodies.

We raced through the forest and broke into a clearing. I stumbled, wheezing, taking in the strange sight before me. Straight ahead and curved

around us stood a huge gray brick wall, so grand it was seemingly endless, stretching into the clouds higher than even the tallest tree. At the wall's center was an ornate red door with a shiny brass lock. Our clearest path of escape.

I rushed forward and tried the handle, but it wouldn't turn.

"It's locked," I called back to Bayne. "We can't get through. We'll need to go back—" My words were drowned out by a loud splintering crack.

The Bandersnatch burst through the tree line, blocking our path. Bayne drew his sword and took on a fighting stance while the monster snorted fire and roared at him.

"You'll need to use the keys," Bayne said. "Hurry!"

"The keys? What keys?" That was when I realized the trees surrounding us weren't hung with leaves, but countless delicate keys on silver strings, their metallic bodies glinting in the light. They tinkled in the wind when they struck each other, a faint melody that was eerily beautiful—if not for the giant Bandersnatch snarling close behind.

"But how do I know which one to use?" I called to Bayne. "There must be thousands!"

"Try to find one that fits." Bayne lunged at the beast, nicking its large tufted back with his sword.

I snatched a handful of keys closest to me. Their silver threads snapped in my grip and I rushed to the door. Frantically, I tried one after another, but the lock didn't budge.

With a frustrated groan, I threw the keys on the ground and grabbed another handful.

Still, none were a match. I glanced behind me at the countless keys left, then at Bayne who was clearly tiring from keeping the Bandersnatch at bay. Time was not on our side. There was no way I could try every single key before the snorting monster killed him—and then me.

I raked a hand through my hair and stared at the huge wall that stretched up as far as the eye could see. There was no way for us to scale it.

That was when I noticed the writing scrolled up along the red doorframe, then back down again, outlining it.

"It says something!" I called out. Perhaps this was a clue to what key I needed to find. I read the words out loud:

“If you enter here today,
Be warned of all the games we’ll play.
On the other side of me,
Is a reflection of what you see.

What’s down is up, what’s right is left,
Nothing is what you’d expect.
Be sure to keep an open mind,
That’s the answer, you will find.

Now to enter here today,
All depends on what you say.
Find another word for key,
Tell the opposite to me.”

I blinked. The strange words did nothing to ease my confusion.

“Find another word for key?” I stared at the front of the red door. “And then say the opposite of it?”

I glanced around the forest at all the shining keys dangling from the trees. “Another word for a key could be a pick . . . And the opposite of that would be a . . .” I turned back to the doorway.

“Lock,” I said loudly.

Nothing happened.

I stared at the strange poem once more.

“Yek?” I said, trying the word *key* backward.

Still nothing.

With a frustrated groan, I called to Bayne, “It says I need to find another word for *key*. And then I need to say the opposite of that.”

“Do I look like”—Bayne darted behind a tree just as the Bandersnatch released a puff of fire and smoke his way—“I have time . . . to solve riddles right now?”

“Riddles . . .” I scanned the strange poem once more. “That’s it! Another word for a key is an answer. And the opposite of an answer is a riddle.”

I faced the door once more and said loudly, “Riddle.”

Nothing happened.

Clenching my fists, I scanned the cryptic message again, focusing on the final part of the instructions. *Tell*, it read. Was the door asking me to tell it a riddle?

I shook my hands at my sides, trying to think of a riddle in my already jumbled brain. I hadn't had a fanciful thought in quite some time, and the pressure of the situation wasn't helping me any. "I need a riddle . . . Think, Avi, think!"

"What is always in front of you," Bayne called out, "that you cannot see?"

At that, the ground quaked. A mighty gust shook the trees, the keys waving wildly in their branches, creating a great tinkling din. Slowly, the great door creaked open.

"It worked!" I cried and turned back to Bayne. "You did it."

"Go!" he commanded, pointing his sword at the furious Bandersnatch as he backed up to follow me.

I rushed through the entrance, a strange weightless sensation taking over as I passed the threshold.

Chapter 7
- BAYNE -

The moment I passed through the doorway after Aviva, my stomach swooped, then I stumbled to the ground, landing in a soft field of wildflowers and tall grass.

I scrambled to my feet and scooped up my fallen sword, fearful that the Bandersnatch had followed us through, even though the passageway was much too small for its gargantuan body.

I blinked. The sky above us was still a deep crimson, but where the wall and doorway had been moments before, there now stood a massive mahogany grandfather clock, splendid and majestic in the vast field. It towered over us, its huge clockface staring down from its ornate frame, and instead of a glass doorway revealing a pendulum, a full-length mirror stared back.

Aviva walked toward it carefully, then stopped, a troubled look upon her face. “Bayne, look.”

“What is it?” Still breathing heavily, I joined her in front of the clock, plunging my sword into the sheath around my waist.

She pointed to the inscription scrawled across the top, carved into the wood encircling the ticking clockface. *“I reflect the darkest light. A stain of red on purest white . . .”* She shuddered and glanced down. “Something isn’t right about this mirror.”

I stared at our reflections blinking back at us. She was right. Instead of the white garments we wore, our reflections were dressed in red, a bright scarlet.

“It must be a trick mirror,” I said, glancing at our white clothes, so different from how they appeared in the looking glass. I turned my attention to the crimson-hued sky above us. “Perhaps a trick of the light?”

“Is that what it is?” Aviva didn’t seem convinced. “There’s something sinister about it. I don’t like it. And look”—she pointed to the clock atop the

mirror—“the hands are ticking backward. How strange . . .”

“Almost everything in this place is a trick or a puzzle. But a mirror is the least of my concerns. I’m more worried about the things that are trying to kill us.”

She didn’t answer as she slowly reached forward and touched her reflection’s hand.

“See? It’s only glass.” I sighed heavily. “But this place is enough to make you second-guess the simplest of things.”

She ran her fingers along the side of the mirror, tugging. “The door doesn’t open . . . What about the other side?”

I walked around the towering clock, but the opposite side held the same mirror. Was this the doorway we had passed through to escape the Bandersnatch? Whatever it was, there was no going back, for when I tried to open the door, it was sealed shut.

“It’s exactly the same.” Aviva sounded part relieved and part disappointed when she joined me on the other side. “Except for the writing—look!” She pointed to the top where the clock still ticked backward. Only on this side, the scrolled words were different. She read them out loud and my blood ran cold.

“I’ll drive you madder than a hatter . . . Once we break, you’ll surely shatter.” She finished the statement with a shudder. “That doesn’t sound very promising. What do you think it means?”

“It’s nonsense,” I said, squaring my shoulders, although inside I was shaken. She didn’t know the personal nature of that message, but I did. I stared at my crimson-clad reflection. Aviva was correct, something wasn’t right about it—about our reflections. And it wasn’t just the strange color of our clothes. It was the vacant expression in our eyes. Beside me, Aviva stared as well, as transfixed as I was by the scene.

Movement flashed behind me in the mirror. A familiar face. A familiar threadbare hat. A familiar presence, always hanging over my shoulder.

I whipped around. “Did you see that?”

The space behind me was empty. No one stood there. Not like what had flashed in the mirror.

“See what?” Aviva turned too, looking out into the field, then back to the mirror, then at me. “What did you see?”

I turned again to the looking glass, but it only showed our red-garbed reflections.

I shook my head fiercely. “Nothing.”

I turned my back to the giant clock and began walking long determined strides, intent on putting distance between myself and that looking glass of lies. “Get away from there. It’s just a trick. Nonsense.” I said it more to myself than her. “Like everything else in this place.”

Surely, I had imagined the man I saw. The words around the clock had planted him in my mind. A trick of my imagination was all it was.

“Where even *are* we?” Aviva asked, catching up with me. “Were you here before?”

I scanned our surroundings. A field of wildflowers edged with rose bushes lay in one direction and a forest in the other. There wasn’t anything particularly remarkable about it. “I can’t be certain . . . I never passed through that red door, I know that. But it’s hard to say where we are in a land of madness.” I spied something else in the distance. Tucked under a grove of trees sat a table and some chairs.

“Look.” I pointed to it.

“How odd,” Aviva said as we walked closer, and I couldn’t help but agree with her.

A deceptively docile scene greeted us—an abandoned tea party. A spread of assorted cakes, tiny sandwiches, and steaming cups of freshly brewed tea sat on the oblong table. A lace tablecloth covered it. Crisp white napkins and white and red rose petals were scattered about.

“It’s beautiful,” Aviva said. “But why would someone abandon a tea party like this?”

“It may not be abandoned. It may be set up for us.” The back of my neck prickled as I took in the inviting scene and delicious-looking food. “Whatever you do, don’t eat or drink anything.”

“Why? Do you think—” Aviva drew in a sharp breath and pointed to my left arm. “Bayne, you’re hurt. Why didn’t you say something?”

I glanced down, already too aware of the stinging. My left sleeve was singed and ragged, the skin underneath red and burned. “It’s only a small burn from the Bandersnatch.”

“That’s not what I would call small.” Aviva eyed my tattered sleeve. “Does it hurt terribly?”

“Let’s just say it’s a good reminder that what happens here is enough to hurt us. And how lucky we are to have escaped that beast.”

“Sit.” Aviva pulled one of the tiny chairs from the table and set it in front of me. “It needs to be bandaged.”

As I sank onto the seat, she plucked up a large white linen napkin and began folding it lengthwise. Her amber eyes turned thoughtful. “I suppose we should be thankful that was the only damage the beast did to you . . . Quick thinking, by the way. What’s the answer to the riddle you told?”

I turned and gazed out into the field, then repeated the question. “What is always in front of you that you cannot see?” I paused for a moment. “Why, the future of course.”

“Of course,” Aviva murmured as she took my arm in her hands and began peeling away the remainder of my sleeve.

I winced against the pain as some of the material stuck to my burned skin. I glanced back and couldn’t help but notice how delicately and skillfully Aviva’s fingers moved while she worked. Further proof of her experience as a healer, but also her gentleness. She had a soothing manner about her—when she wasn’t threatening me with her bow or attempting to tie me to a tree, that is.

“How did you think of that riddle so quickly?” she went on. “You don’t exactly strike me as the fanciful type.”

I turned my head away, not wanting to watch what she was doing, the scent of my seared flesh rancid in my nostrils, and focused on keeping my voice even—no easy task considering what we were discussing. “My father. He loved to entertain me and my brother with riddles when we were young.”

“I see.” Aviva pressed the bandage against my wounds. “And did you—”

The searing pain that shot through my arm caused me to jerk away from her with a yell.

“What’s wrong?” Aviva asked.

I examined my flesh, the burns turning redder as if they were on fire once more. A sticky residue coated the wound. “What did you do?”

“It’s only honey.” Aviva held up a small jar, the word *honey* innocently scrawled across it. “It should soothe the burn, not hurt it. I applied this treatment countless times as a healer and never had a patient react like that. Are you allergic?”

“No.” I gritted my teeth and plucked a fresh napkin from the table, then carefully dabbed at my wounded skin, removing the sticky substance. “No, I’m not allergic. But that’s not like our honey.”

“I don’t understand.” Aviva picked up the jar and sniffed it. “It smells exactly the same.” She dipped her finger in for a taste, but I knocked the jar from her hands.

“Don’t eat it! Don’t eat *any* of this.” I waved a hand around the table. “This world, it’s not like ours. What should help us, hurts us. The food and drink can do strange things to you—or make you very ill. Trust me, I learned the hard way last time.”

Aviva’s mouth rounded. “Nothing is what you’d expect . . . That’s what the doorway said.” She grabbed a fresh napkin and helped me wipe my wound clean. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t think.”

“It’s not your fault. You didn’t know.” My shoulders relaxed as the sting in my arm lessened. “Whatever you do, don’t drop your guard for a second in this place. Don’t trust anything or anyone.”

“If we can’t eat anything—” Aviva wiped her own hands and stared at me, wide-eyed. “Are we going to starve?”

I shook my head. “Our bodies are back in Fernshire, remember? As long as they give us food and drink there, we’ll be fine. We’re trapped here mentally, and although we are still connected to our bodies, our bodily needs don’t need to be met here.”

“I guess that makes sense.” Aviva turned back to my wound, wrapping it with clean linen now that the honey was off. “As much as any of this can make sense . . .” She tied off the bandage and then wiped her hands. “So how do we get out of here?”

“I don’t know.”

“How did you escape last time?”

“I didn’t escape. Those in Fernshire found a way to bring me back.”

Aviva’s voice quickened with desperate hope. “So they can bring us back too.”

I shook my head. “The Jabberwock brought me here and the Jabberwock brought me out. This time . . . the last Jabberwock is dead. The last one I know of, anyway.”

“Great. So not only did I curse myself, I killed the only antidote to the curse.”

I offered a sad smile. “Essentially.”

A weary laugh escaped Aviva’s lips. “Why am I not surprised? That seems to be about how things go for me . . .” Her shoulders slumped momentarily, then she met my gaze again, eyes serious. “So what are we going to do?”

“Survive? Hope we find a way out? Hope those back in Fernshire find another way to bring us back? Those are about our only options.” I stroked my beard. “Before I joined you here, I told one of the Fernshire knights what happened. He was on his way to fetch help from the castle. They should be able to take care of us in Fernshire, at least.”

Aviva swallowed. “If there was a way to bring us back from Fernshire, then shouldn’t there be a way for us to cross back over from here?”

“In theory.” I gazed across the field. “Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing how to do that—”

My words were cut off by an evil laugh coming from the surrounding forest. We both startled, and I reached an involuntary hand toward Aviva.

“What was that?” Her wide eyes followed my gaze toward the darkening tree line.

The wind rustled the leaves, carrying the menacing laugh toward us once again.

“Get behind me,” I said quietly as I stepped in front of her, drawing my sword.

She nodded and drew the dagger from the belt at her waist.

The trees rustled again, and through the folds of the branches, a man stepped into view, grinning wickedly.

“How kind of you both to join my party,” he said.

Chapter 8
- AVIVA -

“Kartoff?” I gasped, hardly able to believe my eyes.

In front of me, Bayne’s shoulders tensed and he widened his stance, blocking me. While I appreciated the gesture, it did little to calm my racing pulse. Even when there had been a kingdom between us, my mind had been plagued by the irrational fear that Kartoff would find me and finish what he’d started. Our run-in with him the last few days had only added to that fear.

“What’s the matter, Aviva?” Kartoff tilted his head, mocking smile still on his face. “You seem confused.”

“Of course.” I continued to stare at him, resisting the innate urge to run. “You looked in the Jabberwock’s eyes too . . .” If Bayne had followed me here, it only made sense that Kartoff had been brought here as well.

“Isn’t this a fascinating place?” Kartoff heaved in a deep breath and glanced around him. He looked just like he had in Fernshire, except his hunting jacket was now a deep red. “A veritable wonderland. The things that are possible . . . I suppose I should thank you two for trapping me here.” His eyes returned to us, shrewd and hard, implying he wasn’t here to thank us.

“You brought yourself here.” Bayne kept his gaze fixed on Kartoff, his sword poised and ready. “Your greed for power. No man was ever meant to control the Jabberwock.”

“No?” Kartoff took a menacing step toward us. “I’m afraid I must disagree. I think that’s exactly what man was made for—great men, anyway. And this place is just the start. Why don’t I show you the possibilities? After all, I so did want you to meet my cat.”

With a flourish of his hand, Kartoff reached inside his crimson jacket and procured the same cat-o’-nine-tales whip he had threatened Bayne with a

few days ago. Gleaming chains with nine pointed silver ends like claws twinkled in the red light.

“I’m armed now, Kartoff.” Bayne tightened his grip on his sword, his voice steady. “Do your worst. Your whip is no match for my blade.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure, fool,” Kartoff said. “The cat likes to play.”

Kartoff struck the air with his whip, and with a crack, it leaped from his hand, transforming into a real cat. Snarling, it flew toward Bayne, sharp claws poised for his throat.

With a surprised yell, Bayne twisted to the side. His free hand grabbed around my waist, tugging me with him, away from the enraged feline.

The cat landed easily on its feet atop the tea party table, while Bayne pulled me farther back. Tossing its head once, the black cat sauntered toward us, fixing its bright green eyes on the feast. As it glided across the table, its paws avoiding every saucer and teacup, it finally settled in front of a small white cream-filled cake.

The cat licked its lips, then inclined its head toward Kartoff as if asking permission. Only then did I notice the streaks of silver running across both sides of its face, making it look as if it were grinning.

“Are you hungry, my pet?” Kartoff stroked the feline—a sickeningly sweet gesture that didn’t match his cruel demeanor. Then he lifted the delicate rosebud-painted saucer with the white frosted cake to the cat’s mouth. The cat took a few bites, then it began to grow.

I gasped as the creature grew as large as a jungle cat I’d only ever heard tales of in books.

“Run.” Bayne pushed me toward the forest as he snatched two small cakes off the table and followed me.

Just before we crashed through the trees, I glanced back to see the cat now as large as the table itself. It leaped down, its green eyes fixed on us and its silver smile deadly.

“Hurry!” Bayne grabbed my hand and we pushed through the branches and ran as fast as we could. Within seconds, the cracking of branches and leaves followed. The beast was in pursuit.

“Eat this.” Bayne handed me the cake he had swiped from the table. “Quickly.”

“But—” I stumbled over a root on the forest floor when my eyes turned to the deceptively delicious-looking cake in my hand. “You said not to eat

anything here.”

“In this case, we don’t have a choice. Take a bite.” Bayne shoved his small cake into his mouth.

I did as he commanded. One bite, then another, the sweet cream satisfying my taste buds and dazzling my senses—unreasonably so, for now was not the time to be marveling over teatime treats. Not when there was a giant cat on our heels ready to tear us apart with its massive silver claws.

Despite that, I stumbled and stopped running, placing a hand to my head. The forest around me spun and I fell to my knees.

“Bayne?” I looked up to see him doubled over next to me, but that wasn’t what caused my heart to hammer. No, it was the way everything around us was growing rapidly.

I pressed a hand to my mouth, so dizzy I feared the cake I’d ingested might come back up. The trees surrounding us shot up and their already massive trunks grew to remarkable widths. A small rabbit’s burrow at the base of a nearby tree became the mouth of a cave. The toadstools became umbrellas over our heads. Buzzing insects became the size of birds.

Bayne cursed beside me. And that’s when I realized everything wasn’t growing.

We were shrinking.

“What’s happening?” I wheezed, barely able to catch my breath as I spun around, taking in the giant leaves and sticks surrounding us. Pine needles like swords. Stones like boulders.

“I thought . . .” Bayne pressed a hand to his head, no doubt dizzy too. “We would grow too.”

As if we weren’t already unstable enough, the earth around us began to shake, deafening crashes and crunches accosting our ears. The tread of the cat stalking its prey. Us.

I shook my tingling fingers, trying to remain hopeful. “Maybe it won’t be able to find us.”

“No, all it needs to do is step on us,” Bayne muttered.

I steadied myself, then glanced around the forest floor, so much larger to us now.

“Not if we hide.” I grabbed Bayne’s hand. “Come on.” I tugged him, forcing us both to run again. No easy feat with the earth still shaking and

more leaves and twigs falling around us—debris from the beast's nearby movements.

Making our way was cumbersome as we worked around every obstacle in our path. The beast was no longer tearing through the forest but rather stalking slowly—not chasing us, but hunting us. It sensed we were near but it didn't know where.

A low yowl filled the air as the cat voiced its frustration at having lost us. But I didn't doubt it was a prime hunter. It wouldn't be long before it spotted us.

"In there," I whispered to Bayne as I pointed to what I had spotted across the ground—so close when we had been our regular size, but quite the trek as we attempted to reach it now.

"Clever," Bayne whispered back as we headed toward the rabbit burrow at the bottom of a tree trunk.

I swallowed, staring toward the gaping darkness. "Let's hope whatever is in there isn't worse than what's out here."

With a nod, Bayne tugged my hand and we rushed toward our escape.

No sooner had we taken two steps than a crushing blow forced us apart. With a shriek, I tumbled across the forest floor, scraping my hands and knees as I rolled over and over. My head smacked the ground and I lifted myself, slightly dizzy. "Bayne?"

A low groan was his only response. He lay motionless several feet away. Between us was a fallen branch—no more than a stick if we had been our usual size—but like this, it had struck with the force of a falling log.

"Bayne." I crawled over to him, my bruised limbs aching. "Get up! We need to keep moving."

He groaned again, blinking at me, confusion in his brown eyes.

"We're so close," I said, tugging him up.

I pulled us to our feet, only to be struck down again.

I shrieked, and this time it wasn't from a falling branch. No, what had struck us—what now enclosed us—was softer, but much more deadly.

The cat's paw pinned us to the ground, its sharp claws sticking into the dirt like a makeshift cage.

Chapter 9
- BAYNE -

My aching head pulsed and the sounds around me were far off. A threatening snarl. The hot, heavy breathing of a wild animal. And slow, ominous footsteps coming closer.

But it was Aviva's muffled groan that brought me to.

"Aviva?" My voice was hoarse and quiet.

I blinked and found her pinned beneath me. Immediately, I tried to shift my body off hers, but I couldn't. I was wedged between her and something pressing down on my back, smarting terribly against my wounds.

"What happened?" I freed one hand and pushed my palm flat against the earth, trying to lessen some of my weight, which was surely crushing Aviva.

"It . . . got us." Aviva's reply was breathy and strained, and her wide eyes met mine.

That was when I noticed the gleaming silver claws all around us, like curved jail-cell bars. The giant cat had us in its clutches.

"Well done, my pet." The loud voice sounded above us, in time with the footsteps. Kartoff. Of course. Now that his beast had confined us, he was probably here to crush us beneath his boots.

"We were so close . . ." Aviva muttered, still sounding like she was struggling to breathe. Through the space of the gleaming silver claws, I spied the dark burrow we had been racing toward only moments ago. She was right. We had been very close.

"Aviva," I whispered. "Do you think you can reach my sword?" I shifted my weight again, creating some space between her and my sheathed sword at my hip.

A rustle of movement beneath me. Aviva's hands at my chest, then my waist. In any other situation, her fingers trailing across my body would have

been entirely inappropriate—or much more intimate—but now, they were all practicality.

"Yes," she answered in a quiet breath.

"Good." I caught her eye and lifted my brows, giving her the signal.

Kartoff's taunting continued. "My pet, it isn't polite to play with your food."

Aviva slowly slid the sword from my sheath, then thrust it upward.

The beast released a terrible howl and its suffocating paw lifted, freeing itself from the sword that Aviva held.

We flew to our feet and darted toward the burrow.

"After them," Kartoff ordered his now hissing cat, his footsteps thundering in our direction.

But neither was quick enough.

Aviva and I dove into the rabbit hole, just as Kartoff's hand swiped after us. We rushed forward into blessed freedom and blinding darkness.

Then we stumbled and fell.

Down, down we tumbled. Down the rabbit hole.

***

"Oof!"

As light reached us, we landed on a surprisingly soft carpet. My fingers touched smooth petals.

"Are you all right?" I asked. Aviva had landed a few feet away, my sword still in her grip.

"Yes." She exhaled deeply and immediately looked up. I followed her gaze, surprised by the soft red light all around us. I expected to see dirt and darkness, but there was no sign of the burrow we had fallen through.

Only patches of sky—a familiar red sky—peeking between huge stalks of flowers, every color and shape.

"It looks like we're in a garden," Aviva said, glancing around.

She was right.

We were still small. Or everything here was large. Either way, we were surrounded by rows and rows of flowers standing tall in a colorful medley.

“How deceptively innocent,” I said, accepting my sword from her when she held it out. I wiped it on one of the fallen petals, staining it with blood.

“Do you think Kartoff will follow us?” Aviva nervously glanced upward from where we had fallen, even though there was no visible passageway.

“I don’t know,” I replied honestly, then managed a small smile. “Hopefully he’s too busy tending to his injured cat.” I shoved my sword into its sheath. “How is it that the creatures here want to kill us but seem to have befriended him?”

“Kartoff is the kind of man who lives for chaos and destruction,” Aviva said with disdain. “I imagine this world suits him. What did he call it? A wonderland?”

I scoffed. “Who knows what kind of power this world might give him.” I jerked my head. “We should keep moving.”

Aviva fell into step beside me. “Will we stay this size?”

“No, the cakes’ effects should wear off with time and we’ll return to our regular size.”

“That’s a relief.”

“That was quite the blow you gave that beast.” I recalled how she had stuck my sword clean through its paw. “Nice work.”

“We had one shot to get away.” She grinned. “I had to make it count.”

“That you did. Are you hurt at all?”

She shook her head. “Just some bruises. You?”

Gingerly, I pressed my hand to the back of my head where the falling branch had struck me earlier. There was a sizable lump under my hair, and my head ached something fierce, but no blood.

“Just a lump on my head,” I said. “Nothing too terrible.”

“Despite that, you managed to keep a clear head. I didn’t even think to use your sword before you said it. I was too worried I was going to be crushed underneath you.”

“My apologies.” I bobbed my head, glancing at my feet as I recalled the press of our bodies at that moment and the feel of her hands on me.

“It certainly wasn’t your fault.” She appeared unfazed, inhaling deeply. “I’m just relieved I can take a full breath again.” She hauled in another long breath as she closed her eyes. “Mmm . . . it smells so good here.”

She was right. The air was sweet with fragrant flowers—almost too sweet. It made my head hurt even more. I wasn’t tempted to drink in the

scent the way she was.

“Watch your step,” I said as Aviva took another deep breath and swayed to the side, almost crashing into the thorny stems of a huge rose bush.

“Aviva!” I circled an arm around her waist and yanked her away from the offending plant. “You almost walked right into that. Look. Those are large enough to impale you.”

Her eyelids fluttered as she gazed up at me dreamily, and a languid smile spread across her face. “Whoops . . .”

“Be careful.” I released her slowly, making sure she was steady on her feet.

She merely laughed, then bent down and picked up a large crimson petal. She pressed it to her nose and inhaled deeply. “Mmm . . . This one’s my favorite.” She stroked the petal with her fingers. “And it’s so soft.” She shoved it into her pocket, then fell to her knees and began gathering more.

“What are you doing?” I gaped at her. “Now’s not the time to gather rose petals. We have to keep moving.”

“Just a few more.” She barely glanced at me as she pulled a white handkerchief from her pocket and began pressing petals into it—which was a bit ridiculous because the petals were larger than the handkerchief. Still, she stacked them up neatly one after the other, humming a slow song to herself.

“Aviva, let’s go.” I tugged her elbow, pulling her up.

“Just a few more,” she protested. “I don’t think I can live without them.” She folded her bulging handkerchief and shoved it in her pocket.

“What’s the matter with you?”

She didn’t answer. Instead, she began humming again, the tune turning eerie. Her eyes were glazed over, almost vacant.

“Aviva?” I wasn’t annoyed anymore, but alarmed. Her apathy, her obsession with the flowers, her humming—it was all frighteningly odd. I shook her shoulders. “Are you all right?”

Her head lolled to one side and then she slumped against me. “I feel . . . so tired.” She drew in another large breath. “And it smells so good here. Try it.”

Her slow, lazy command struck fear in my heart. This wasn’t right. *She* wasn’t right.

“Aviva, look at me.” I gently tapped her cheek with the palm of my hand. “This air is doing something to you. Stop breathing it in so much, and whatever you do, don’t fall asleep.”

“But I’m so tired.” She yawned and then collapsed against me, resting her head on my shoulder. “Can we . . . just stop . . . and rest?”

“No!” I shook her harder, but it didn’t matter. She was fading. This beautiful fragrant oasis was clouding her mind—for what purpose, I wasn’t certain—but I knew enough about this place to know it couldn’t be good.

“Aviva,” I cried. “Wake up!”

“Mmm . . .” A slow, peaceful moan was all I got.

With no other choice, I scooped her fully into my arms, cradling her against my chest. Then I began to run, seeking a way out of this wretched garden and its perfumed trickery.

The quickening of my steps seemed to jar Aviva awake. “What . . . are you . . . doing?” she asked.

“Trying to get us out of here. These flowers—they’re doing something to you. They’re putting you to sleep.”

“I’m . . . so tired.” Her hands curled around my neck, while she tucked her head against my shoulder. In any other situation, it might have been endearing, but considering where we were, her vulnerability was alarming.

“Couldn’t we stop, Bayne?” The sound of my name on her lips was as soft and silky as the countless petals surrounding us. “Just for . . . a moment?” Her eyes fluttered closed again.

“Aviva, no.” By contrast, my voice was harsh. “You need to stay awake. Fight it.”

“Call me . . . Avi.” She yawned. “Please?”

“All right,” I agreed automatically. Anything to keep her talking. “Avi it is.”

“Thank . . . you. It’s been . . . so long since anyone’s called me that.” She seemed pleased, but the pauses between her words were getting longer.

“Avi.” I tried her new-to-me name again. It fell from my lips easily, but my lungs burned and my own eyelids drooped. “Talk to me—about anything at all. Just keep talking.” Running wasn’t doing me any favors because I was sucking in deeper breaths of the tainted air. My legs grew leaden, and my steps were thick—like I was walking through deep sand and not merely on a carpet of petals.

But flowers surrounded us on all sides, and my only hope was there was an end to this garden somewhere, and if I kept moving, we'd find a way out.

"You're kinder . . . than I realized," Avi said slowly. "Not at all . . . pompous . . . like Princess Opal said."

If not for the gravity of the situation, I could have laughed. "Thank you." I shifted my hold on her, her grasp around my neck slipping. "I'm glad you've not found me to be too unbearable."

"In fact, I daresay . . ." One of Avi's arms slipped from my shoulder and dangled loosely at her side, her head tipping away from me. "I rather like you . . . Sir Bayne."

"Just Bayne will do." I stopped and set Avi gently down on the flowered floor, keeping watch to make sure she was still awake. "And you're not so bad yourself. When you're not stealing things, that is."

Avi's only reply was a languid laugh. I yanked my tunic from my shoulders, then tied it around my face to block some of the offending air. What would happen to us if we both succumbed to the flowers' sleeping spell? Would it kill us? Or would Kartoff find us and do it?

I finished securing my shirt over my face, then adjusted my cloak around Avi's shoulders. "Cover your face," I said. "It will help." I gently pressed her hand over the cloak at her mouth and nose to keep it in place. Then I scooped her up and continued my trek.

"I'm so . . . tired," Avi mumbled against the cloak. "So . . . tired."

"I know." I too was feeling the flowers' dizzying effects, but I held her tight, my protective instinct for this dazed woman overruling my own need to rest. "Just hold on."

Finally, once my mind was so fuzzy and I felt I couldn't keep my heavy eyelids open any longer, I broke out of the garden and into a clearing with nothing but a few trees lining a dusty dirt path.

"Avi." I yanked the shirt from my face and collapsed to my knees, filling my lungs with fresh air as I set Avi against a tree trunk.

Her eyes were closed and she gave no response.

"Avi . . ." My vision swam and my words slurred. "Please . . . wake up."

That was the last thing I remembered before I, too, succumbed and fell beside her on the ground into a deep sleep.

Chapter 10
- AVIVA -

“Bayne?” I awoke with a fuzzy mind. I recalled a perfumed paradise of the most beautiful giant flowers, but when I blinked, all I saw were dark trees.

Trees their normal size. At some point during my sleep, the cake’s effects must have worn off. I was no longer small.

I scanned the forest, red light peeking through the leaves, but Bayne was nowhere to be seen.

“Bayne?” I called again. Where had he gone? The last thing I remembered was being cradled in his arms as he rushed to find a way out of the giant flower garden. The memory was hazy, but finding myself alone only emphasized how safe I’d felt in his embrace. How certain I’d felt that he would protect me, even as I slipped away into unconsciousness.

That fact heightened my unease. I didn’t believe that Bayne had chosen to leave me. Had Kartoff found him?

I took another look at my surroundings. This wasn’t where I’d fallen asleep. There was no garden, only thick trees. How had I gotten here? A rustling in the forest caught my attention and I froze.

“Bayne,” I called again, hoping it was him between the trees. That he had simply been exploring and hadn’t truly left me.

But instead of Bayne, a small dot of white appeared on the ground between the dark foliage.

A white rabbit.

My racing heart slowed. But just barely. After all, there was no way of knowing what to expect here. The honey I had put on Bayne’s wound had hurt him. A cat had grown ten times its size and tried to kill us. Even something as innocent as a white rabbit could be sinister. Bayne had said to not trust anyone or anything.

But as the rabbit hopped toward me, its bouncy gait so adorable, I couldn’t help but smile.

“Hello there,” I said softly as it stopped and sniffed my feet. It certainly didn’t seem harmful. But to be safe, I didn’t touch it. “And what’s your name?”

It didn’t answer. Not that I was expecting it to, but if it had, I wouldn’t have necessarily been surprised.

It did, however, lift its head and stare at me. It held my gaze, completely steady, unlike its twitchy nose.

“Can you understand me?”

It bobbed its head once.

“You can?” I crouched toward it. Had I gone completely mad, talking to a rabbit? “Do you know where Bayne is?”

It bobbed its head again.

“Where is he? Is he all right?”

With a jerk of its head, it turned and began hopping toward the trees. A clear invitation for me to follow it.

I hurried forward a few paces then froze. It couldn’t be wise for me to follow this creature into the forest. It could be a trick or a trap.

“Bayne!” I called one more time, as loudly as I could. I paused, waiting. There was no answer.

With a rueful head shake, I followed the lumbering rabbit into the forest. What other choice did I have? Bayne had protected me in the flower garden. If he was in trouble now, I owed it to him to try to help.

Never mind that I missed his reassuring presence and levelheaded manner. There was a part of me that didn’t want to admit it. I’d vowed to only ever rely on myself, but in a place like this, who could blame me for wanting his company?

I walked on. Although nothing about the rabbit I was following was menacing, I kept one hand tucked inside my cloak on the dagger at my waist. My gaze darted all around in search of other threats.

“I do hope you know where you’re going,” I muttered to the rabbit. It didn’t acknowledge my words—it just kept plodding along at its easy pace.

Finally, we broke through a clearing where a little cottage was nestled between trees.

“Oh.” I stopped and stared at it. “Is Bayne here?” It certainly wasn’t where we’d last been. I’d never seen this place before in my life. It was a charming stone structure, with a thatched roof and smoke billowing from its

chimney. It was almost inviting, if not for the shutters on its windows closed tight.

The rabbit kept right on twitching his nose and hopped up to the doorstep. Then it turned and stared at me expectantly, inclining its head.

“What should I do?” I asked. “Should I knock?”

Another bob.

“Very well.” I rapped upon the door, feeling foolish. What if the rabbit had led me here to be eaten by a dragon? Or captured by a witch?

But to my relief, when the door creaked open, Bayne’s smiling face greeted me through the darkness.

“You made it!” He turned his eyes to the rabbit. “Well done, well done, Teacup.”

“Teacup?” I gave him a curious look. “You named the rabbit? How did you get here? And why are you dressed like that?” He was no longer in his white hunting garb. Now he wore a whimsical black top hat, quite threadbare at the edges, with a tarnished brass buckle around the base. His jacket was a royal-blue velvet, and a white ruffled shirt peeked out from underneath. In all honesty, he looked a bit ridiculous.

“No time to explain.” He checked a gold pocket watch pinned to his jacket. “Inside, quickly.” He pulled my arm and yanked me through the doorway.

The dimly lit cottage was a mess. With the windows drawn tight, the only light came from the brick fireplace in the middle of the room and a few candles on a long wooden table, which was abundantly cluttered.

In the center sat a large wooden chessboard, the pieces knocked over and strewn about. Dirty dishes were piled everywhere, and even the floor was in disarray. Many of the floorboards had been pried up and were scattered in haphazard piles across the cottage. A gleaming copper teakettle began to whistle on a stove in the corner, the shrill wail startling me.

Bayne rushed toward it, muttering to himself as he grabbed a dishcloth and pulled the kettle away from the heat. He turned to face me as the kettle’s whistle died away with a shriek.

“I’m so glad you made it,” he said, his tired eyes meeting mine, then flitting away as if fearful of an unknown menace. “I fear there isn’t much time.”

And that was when I realized. This man—though he resembled Bayne—was not him. He was older, for one thing, the hair under his hat graying, although his beard was still mostly auburn. His eyes weren't brown, but dark green, and his gaze darted around the room in a peculiar fashion, much like the words falling from his mouth.

My heart picked up its pace. Who was this man?

"Where is it . . . where is it?" He moved the clutter around the table, searching for something. He plucked a pair of spectacles from the mess and perched them on his nose, then continued searching, his movements harried and jerky.

As I watched him, it was almost laughable that I had mistaken him for Bayne. Despite their resemblance, he didn't have Bayne's steadiness. Unease coiled in my stomach the more I watched him. So like Bayne, but so not. He seemed almost unhinged.

"I'm sorry, I think there's been some mistake . . ." I grasped the top of a rickety wooden chair. "I'm looking for Bayne . . . do you know where he is?"

"He'll be along, he'll be along." The man flapped a hand, then turned his back to me. "I'm sure of it . . . Now, where is it?" He rummaged through a cupboard behind the stove. "Everything here is topsy-turvy . . ." He turned back to me with a jaunty grin. "Nothing's ever where I expect it to be. Never where I left it."

"I need to go . . ." I moved toward the door, but this strange version of Bayne flew across the room and blocked it with his large body.

"No!" His confused eyes grew distressed. "You can't leave without it . . . She's waiting for you."

"Who is?" I wasn't sure what was more concerning—his nonsensical words or the fact that he was keeping me prisoner in this cottage.

"Sit." He took my hand and pulled me away from the door, placing me in one of the wooden chairs, which teetered as I dropped into it.

"Ah, now I remember!" The man held a finger up and rushed to the corner. He grabbed a broomstick and began poking the ceiling with it. "Where is it? Where is it? Ah!" Another prod of the broom and then a cloth-wrapped package fell from the ceiling beam and landed on the floor with a soft thud.

“I knew it! I knew it!” The man picked it up gleefully, then carefully unwrapped the fabric. “Everything’s topsy-turvy here. I always hide things under the floorboards, but not here . . . Not here.”

I guess that explained why half the floor’s planks had been removed. The man must have been searching for whatever had dropped out of the ceiling.

“Take these.” He shoved two flasks into my hands, his own hands shaking. “One for you and one for him. You need them for when they come for you, and they *will* come for you . . . it’s only a matter of time.” He laughed and turned to a cuckoo clock on the wall. “Oh time, you fickle friend.”

I stared at the flasks he’d given me. They were dark glass, and each had a tag wrapped with twine around its neck with the instructions *Drink Me* written in a childlike hand. It was odd, but then again, the man before me had a childlike quality to him.

He clutched my hands. “Keep them safe now. Promise me you’ll keep them safe. It’s very important . . . And should you need them, there’s one for you and one for Bayne.”

“Where *is* Bayne?” I asked.

“He’ll be along . . . he never was one for being on time.” The man glanced at his watch with a *tsk*.

I almost contradicted him. I couldn’t imagine Bayne as anything but punctual.

The man smiled at me, lines crinkling around his eyes, a gentleness to them that somehow set me at ease. “How very odd that he found you . . . not what I’d expect, but then again, nothing here ever is.” A wild laugh followed.

I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. “Well, he *hasn’t* found me, we’ve been separated.”

“But he has!” the man insisted. “A brilliant design—you’re his missing piece, his other half. But—” He procured a gold coin from his pocket and held up a finger on his other hand in warning. “You must also remember, there are two sides to every coin. There’s another side you must both beware of. That’s why I gave you the flasks. Do you have them?” His eyes turned manic once again.

“Yes.” I rewrapped and tucked the flasks into my cloak pocket. “I’ve got them, don’t worry—”

“It’s like in chess.” The man hurried over to the haphazard chessboard and began righting the tipped pieces. “You have your knight.” He waved a white knight at me. “His job is to protect, and he does a fine job, but—” He grabbed another piece. “The queen! She can go anywhere—anywhere, I tell you!” He squeezed a red queen in his palm and turned his crazed eyes to me. “You can’t let her.”

“I see . . .” I said, even though I didn’t. Unease crept up my spine and I stood slowly. Perhaps if I kept the man talking, I could inch toward the door. “But what do you mean about—”

Before I could question the man about his strange ramblings, the cottage door flew open, banging against the opposite wall, causing me to jump.

Bayne strode in, his sword drawn. “Stay away from her!” He grabbed my arm and pulled me toward him, although his eyes remained fixed on the man.

“Bayne.” I turned, grateful to see him. This truly was Bayne, still dressed just as I remembered. The feel of his hand on my arm and his tall, solid frame beside me flooded me with comfort. So much so, that I gently extracted my arm from his grip. Heaven help me, I was becoming far too dependent on him.

“You’re here . . .” The man from the cottage gazed at Bayne through his spectacles as if he couldn’t quite believe it. “You made it, my dear boy.” He chuckled and glanced at his watch. “You always were one for being late . . .”

Bayne’s jaw ticked, and he did not return the man’s greeting. Instead, he turned to me. “Are you all right?” The worry in his brown eyes was strangely reassuring. Had he been as unsettled by our separation as I had been?

I nodded. “Yes, but—”

Bayne grabbed my arm again. “Let’s go.”

“Aren’t you going to stay for tea?” the man asked, confused once more, as the cuckoo clock on the wall began to call the hour—a raucous din that made me want to press my hands to my ears.

But there was no need because Bayne yanked me out the door and pulled me into the forest.

“Hurry,” Bayne commanded, and I did, but I glanced back to see the man standing at the doorway of the cottage, staring after us with a wistful

sadness in his eyes. Then we pushed through the trees and he was out of view.

We ran for a while until my lungs felt like they might burst. “I can’t—” I gasped. “I can’t go any farther.”

“We can rest for a moment.” Bayne released my arm, and I doubled over, placing both hands on my knees, trying to catch my breath.

“I don’t understand.” I straightened and stared at Bayne. While I was used to him being decisive and quick to act, his insistence on distancing ourselves from the little cottage was perplexing. “Who was that man? What did he want?”

“That”—Bayne sucked in a deep breath—“was my father.”

“Your father?” That explained the resemblance, but it didn’t explain Bayne’s actions. “Then why were you so afraid of him?”

“Because my father was mad.” Bayne’s eyes turned sharp. “Surely you noticed?”

“He certainly seemed a bit . . . eccentric. But he didn’t seem dangerous.”

“Well, he is.” Bayne rested a hand against a nearby tree, rubbing his temple. “And even if he wasn’t, you forget your surroundings.” Bayne gestured around him. “Nothing is safe here. This place uses our minds against us . . . My father died years ago, so whether he’s a manifestation of my memory or truly here somehow, it matters little. It’s a good thing I found you.”

“Where were you?” As curious as I was about his father, I was even more concerned about why Bayne had left me. “When I awoke, I couldn’t find you.”

“It appears to be what happens when we fall asleep here. We’re here in our minds, remember? And when we sleep, our minds wander. I got us out of the flower garden, but then I succumbed to the perfume too. We both fell asleep—that’s why we were separated. Our minds took us to different locations.”

“Oh, I see . . .” I rubbed my head. I was relieved Bayne hadn’t chosen to leave me, but his words were still disturbing. Would it happen again? I hadn’t liked being alone here—at all. Our separation hit me with a new appreciation for what Bayne had done, coming after me into this world. Having him by my side was helpful in ways far beyond his knowledge of this place—his steadying presence, his practical conversation, his

comforting touch. Which was made apparent when he laid a gentle hand on my arm, pulling me toward him.

“How did my father find you?” His brows drew together, concern etching his features as he studied me. “He didn’t hurt you in any way, did he?”

“No, he didn’t hurt me.” I managed to keep my voice calm, despite the internal reaction I was having to his nearness. How was it that I could so readily feel the heat from his skin while in this dreamlike state? Our bodies weren’t even here, but mine was still very aware of his.

It wasn’t a question I had the words to ask, so instead, I continued to explain. “And your father didn’t find me, exactly. I awoke in the forest, and there was a white rabbit that led me to his cottage. Then he wanted me to wait there for you. He said he knew you would come.”

“What else?” Bayne released me, but he was still close enough that I felt the warmth of his presence. “You didn’t eat or drink anything he gave you, did you?”

“No.” Instinctively, I pressed my hand to my cloak where the flasks his father had given me were tucked away.

“Good. Last time I was here he tried to poison me.”

“Poison you? Why would he do that?”

A long pause, then finally, Bayne sighed and scrubbed a hand down his face. “Because I’m the reason he went mad.”

Chapter 11
- BAYNE -

Avi stared at me as if I were the crazy one. And maybe I was. After this, I certainly felt well on my way.

"I don't understand," she said slowly. "How could you have caused your father to go mad?"

I blinked at her. I could tell her it was none of her business. I didn't talk about this part of my past—ever. But given our circumstances, and the way this world had just tossed the worst part of my life at us, perhaps it was best if she knew the whole story—for her own safety. She was entwined with my past here, just as much as I was with hers.

With a sigh, I sat upon a fallen log. "When I was a lad, I was . . . different."

"Different than you are now?"

"Different in every sense of the word." I threw a hand in the air. "I didn't talk much and I hardly interacted with others around me—I lived in my own world. My mother died when I was just a baby, so my father thought that was why." I gave a slight shake of my head. "Whatever it was, I didn't do things most children my age did . . . My father did the best he could with me in between running his shop—he was a hatmaker in the Tover village."

"Tover?" Avi's brows creased as she sat beside me. "Why didn't you tell me you were from there?"

"It was so long ago . . . Like another lifetime."

"Why did you leave?" She settled beside me on the log, her eyes alight with curiosity. "Did you run off to become a knight?"

I shook my head. "Being a knight was never my dream. It was my brother's. My brother, Rowan, was four years older than me and very skilled and brave. I think my father wanted him to take over his shop, but knighthood called to Rowan. My father agreed that when he came of age, he could go to the kingdom and train to be a knight.

“In addition to being daring and noble, Rowan was very kind. He took care of me when he wasn’t helping in my father’s shop. He tried to teach me swordplay and strategy—things I didn’t particularly excel at, but Rowan was very patient.”

“It sounds like he was a good brother,” Avi mused.

“He was. When I was seven, he gave me a white rabbit. He’d caught it in one of his traps when it was quite young, and for whatever reason, he gave it to me.” I released a rueful laugh. “I think it was so weak and pathetic that it reminded him of me.”

“You?” Avi laughed too but hers was in disbelief. “Weak? Pathetic? That, I’m not sure I believe.”

I didn’t correct her. I knew whatever strength and grit I now possessed had been welded into me by the fire of adversity. I went on.

“I loved that thing. Unnaturally so, I suppose, because I took it everywhere I went and could barely stand to be away from it. My father didn’t mind, however, because before long, I started to talk to it. Full-on conversations the way I never had before.”

“Did it ever talk back?” Avi pressed her lips together like she was fighting back a smile. I knew she was teasing me, but I didn’t mind. In some ways, it made what I was about to tell her easier.

“Not that I recall . . .” I scratched my neck. “One day, my brother and I were running an errand for my father in town. It was the busiest part of the day, a complete hustle and bustle. I had tucked my rabbit into my jacket, even though Rowan had told me to leave it at home. But I didn’t listen, and at some point in all the commotion, the poor thing got spooked. It wriggled out of my grasp and darted into the street.” I swallowed, my throat turning tight. “I ran after it, blindly, and my brother ran after me.

“I scooped the rabbit up right before it was crushed under horses’ hooves and wagon wheels. My brother”—my voice cracked, even after all these years—“he wasn’t so lucky. He threw himself over me and was struck. He died almost instantly.”

“Oh Bayne, I’m so sorry.” Avi’s eyes weren’t teasing now.

“My father saw the whole thing happen in the blink of an eye from his shop window. He came racing out into the street, but it was too late.” I looked at my hands. “The grief was too much for him. He’d already lost my mother. His mind began to fail him shortly after. At first, he was confused

—much like you saw him today—sometimes he'd forget who I was, or he'd talk to me as if he thought I were Rowan. But it grew worse. His shop suffered. People began to call him the Mad Hatter. Eventually, his madness overtook him. He grew angry—violent. He blamed me for my brother's death and . . . he was right."

"It wasn't your fault." Avi's eyes were sad but kind. "It wasn't as if you wished your brother ill."

Her words did nothing to ease my guilt. "It should have been me who died that day. Not Rowan." I squared my shoulders. "I grew up after that. I let my rabbit go in the woods, and I spent all my spare time training to be a knight. I didn't want"—I shook my head—"I didn't want Rowan's dream to die with him."

"That sounds like a noble endeavor," Avi said softly.

"It was difficult. I didn't have a natural talent for it—not like my brother—and I wasn't brave like him. But eventually, I was able to serve at the castle and earn enough to hire care for my father."

"What happened to him?"

"He died when I was eighteen. I wasn't there—I was in service at that point. But I heard he went peacefully. After the life he had, he deserved at least that."

"I'm sorry, Bayne." A pause and then, "So that's why you were so dedicated to being a knight . . ."

I stared at my hands, feeling like a fraud even after all this time. "My brother never got to live his dream. So I try to honor his memory by doing so . . ." I'd never vocalized my reason for my choice to anyone before this—there had been no one left in my life for me to do so. Rowan had been gone, and my father hadn't been coherent enough for me to explain it to him. But now, sharing this with Avi not only felt right, it felt freeing. "After my father's death, there wasn't anything left for me in Tover. King Edmond released me from my service, and I went on to Fernshire." With no more explanations left to give, I looked up and met Avi's gaze. There was no judgment there, just a soft sadness, mixed with understanding.

"You did good things in Fernshire, Bayne." Her words were slow and gentle, much like the hand she placed over mine. I sensed her hesitation, no doubt wondering if I would welcome a caring gesture from her. Surprisingly, I did. I didn't pull away, but rather let her hand settle on mine,

welcoming the light squeeze of her fingers as she went on. “You’re a good knight. I think your brother would be proud of you—and your father too.”

“My father could barely stand the sight of me before he died.” I waved my free hand, my throat turning tight, this conversation bringing to the surface memories and emotions I had long since stuffed down. “And whatever version of him we saw here, well . . . I don’t believe he held any fondness for me either.”

“Then he doesn’t know you,” Avi said matter-of-factly.

“And you do?” My question was offhanded, almost scoffing—not toward her, but more toward myself. I’d never intended to open up to her—to anyone—but now that I had, I couldn’t take it back. It was unfamiliar and uncomfortable, but in a way, a relief.

“I’m starting to.” Avi’s thumb grazed my knuckles, causing the hairs on my arms to stand up. Almost as if her touch, her words, her very presence were rousing me after a long hazy sleep. “And what I’m finding is nothing like I expected.”

I stared at the ground, a lump building in my throat. I couldn’t quite meet her gaze, but I turned my hand over and squeezed hers back. “It’s been a long time since anyone’s known me.”

“Thank you for giving me the chance to.”

We sat in silence for several moments, our hands clasped together, and an odd peace washed over me. I’d gone into this strange land to save the woman who had saved Fernshire. So why did it feel like she was saving me?

It was a question I didn’t have the answer to, but when I finally glanced at Avi, I found her soft amber eyes studying me with equal parts curiosity and fondness.

I pulled my hand from hers and kneaded the back of my neck. “We should keep moving.”

Avi nodded, clasping her hands in her lap, then her eyes dawned with a new light, as if remembering something. “Wait.” She reached into her cloak pocket, then stretched out her hand, revealing two small flasks. “Your father gave these to me . . . back there.”

I took one, uncorked it, and sniffed. A rancid odor accosted me and I grimaced. “Whatever you do, don’t drink it.”

Avi sniffed hers as well and her nose wrinkled. “That smells terrible. It smells like—”

“Poison.” I stood and walked several paces to a small tree, then I dumped the contents of my flask on the ground. Within seconds, the tree shriveled and died.

Avi gasped and placed a hand to her mouth.

“You can’t trust anyone or anything here,” I said, then tossed the empty flask into the forest.

“I just can’t believe it.” Avi shook her head, eyes wide. “Your own father . . .”

“Believe it.” I set my mouth in a grim line as I stared back at the dead tree. At what was meant to be me. “He never forgave me for what happened to my brother.”

“Bayne.” Avi joined me and placed a hand on my arm. “It wasn’t your fault. Surely, you must realize that. You were a child. And your father couldn’t have been of sound mind if he truly blamed you for it.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Which was true. How could I have expected my father to forgive me when I couldn’t forgive myself? I freed my arm from Avi’s touch, not wanting the familiarity growing between us to distract me. I held my palm out. “We should dump the other one.”

Avi reached to give me the flask, then paused, her hand hovering midair. “Maybe we should hang on to it . . . for protection against the creatures of this world.”

Before I could respond, a flash of black and silver leaped between us. We both shouted in surprise.

I pulled Avi toward me when I spotted a familiar cat, small again, with a silver grin slinking back and forth on a tree branch above our heads. The poison flask’s slender neck was clamped between its sharp teeth. I drew my sword.

“Not so fast.” Kartoff emerged through the rustling foliage. His loyal cat sprang upon his shoulder and dropped the flask into his hand. “Thank you, my pet.”

He turned his eyes toward Avi, making a tsking noise. “Wasting good poison? I’d expect better of you, Aviva.” The cat jumped from his shoulder and settled on a branch, staring down at us with shining green eyes. The

silver streaks on its face gave the appearance that it was gloating over its thievery.

“What do you want with it?” Avi shot back from behind my shoulder. I glanced at her and saw she had her dagger pulled, poised at the ready.

“Let’s just say . . .” Kartoff procured a handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped it around the flask, then shoved it inside his jacket. “I like to be prepared.”

“Then take it and go.”

“I’m afraid I can’t—not without you.” His lips slid into a taunting grin that matched his cat’s. “There’s someone here who’s most eager to see you.”

“Who?” Avi asked, fear lacing her voice.

“Someone very powerful.”

“He’s here, isn’t he?” Avi’s voice trembled slightly. I didn’t know who she was afraid of, but I knew I wasn’t the only one with secrets in my past.

“Come with me and find out.”

“No.” Avi’s refusal was futile, proven as Kartoff reached into his other pocket and unwrapped another cake from the tea party table we had seen earlier.

“Have it your way.” Kartoff held the cake up. “My pet is hungry again, and this growing-cake will hardly satisfy his appetite.” He jerked his head toward me. “Once he finishes it, he’ll move on to your knight here.” His words turned low and deadly. “I was only told to bring you.”

“Fine.” Avi stepped past me before I could stop her. “But you won’t harm Bayne.”

Kartoff nodded. “Drop your weapons and we have a deal.”

Avi let her dagger fall to the forest floor, but I didn’t comply.

Kartoff smirked. “It seems your knight isn’t in the mood to be cooperative.” He raised his cake-filled hand toward his cat again.

“Bayne, drop your sword.” Avi spun to face me, her eyes wide and serious. They held mine steadily. “Trust me.”

I hesitated. The message she was sending me was that she knew what she was doing. I wanted to trust her. And I did—it was Kartoff I didn’t trust. Anyone he wanted to take Avi to couldn’t be good.

“Please,” she said quietly, and while her word was pleading, her eyes were strong.

With a sigh, I lowered my sword to the ground.

“Smart man.” Kartoff closed the distance and scooped our weapons up. He slipped the dagger inside his coat pocket, along with his wrapped cake. “Now move.” He pointed my sword at our backs, and side by side, Avi and I pushed through the trees.

Chapter 12
- AVIVA -

Bayne and I were both silent as we trudged through the forest in front of Kartoff. My mind raced, all while I tried to focus on the task I needed to accomplish—our one chance of escape.

It was especially difficult with Kartoff following so close, eyeing our every move. Side by side, Bayne and I maneuvered through the trees. Occasionally, Bayne's gaze caught mine, full of questions. He knew I had a plan, but he had no clue what it was. And I had little chance to explain it to him with Kartoff behind us, listening and watching.

I tried to edge closer to Bayne, to slip him what I needed to, but there was no opportunity. One wrong move and Kartoff would be onto me. And then we'd really be in trouble.

As we marched on, my mind raced, thinking about what Kartoff was leading us to—or rather whom. The one man I feared even more than Kartoff. The one man I'd thought I was safe from. The man who'd ordered my death.

It had to be King Abrax. Who else could Kartoff be referring to? He'd been hinting at my relationship with Abrax—to what I'd done. My stomach sickened at the thought. Involuntarily, I clutched my abdomen, where I still held a scar from where Kartoff's sword had stabbed me at King Abrax's command.

Of course, it couldn't really be Abrax we were going to see. He was dead. I still remembered the day the news had reached Fernshire that King Abrax's brutal rule was over. That his evil deeds had finally caught up to him. Our kingdom had rejoiced for our Tover neighbors, but no one knew the extent of my relief, that the man who had betrayed me and murdered my sister had finally been stopped.

But it didn't matter here. Here the dead could be brought to life—quite vividly, it seemed. Just as Bayne had seen his dead father, I'd soon be

forced to face Abrax—whatever image of Abrax this strange world conjured. The thought constricted my heart, like weeds choking out flowers.

It wasn't just that I feared seeing Abrax again. I also feared what Bayne would think of me if he found out the extent of my involvement with him. I understood the regret Bayne carried with him—the pain he had just shared with me. But his was born of childhood innocence, an unintentional mistake. My mistake had been equally as deadly, but not so innocent.

The way Bayne had looked at me as he told me his story, like I was an unexpected light in a darkened room, had kindled something in my heart. Something warm and real, but also fragile.

How would Bayne look at me if he found out what I'd done?

I didn't want to contemplate it. But if my plan worked, I wouldn't have to face Abrax or my past. As we went deeper into the forest, the trees grew thicker, and the foliage grew wilder. We soon crossed into a thicket of overgrown brambles.

My skirt became tangled in a mess of thorns at my knees, tugging me back when I tried to keep moving. With a frustrated sigh, I stopped and pulled at my dress. The men weren't having half as much trouble, and Kartoff's awful cat was small enough that it weaved its way on the ground beneath the snarly branches. It was several paces ahead of us as if leading the way.

"Move!" Kartoff commanded at my back, clearly angry that I had stopped.

"I'm trying." I glared at him. "But I'm caught on the thorns."

My voluminous skirt had gotten hopelessly entangled the more I tugged at it. I had to actively loosen each thorn, making little holes in the fabric as I went.

With an impatient sigh, Kartoff pointed his sword at Bayne. "Help your woman."

As Bayne worked to free me, Kartoff crossed ahead of us a few paces, slicing through the thorny thicket.

That was my chance.

Silently, I slid my hand into my pocket and pulled out my handkerchief. With a finger pressed to my lips, I nudged Bayne.

He looked up, a question in his eyes. When I inclined my head, he glanced at my hand.

I unwrapped the cloth, just slightly, revealing a handful of pressed flower petals between the fabric. Flowers from the garden that had put us to sleep, only now they were normal size, not gigantic like they had been in our shrunken state. The moment I lifted the handkerchief, that familiar tantalizing floral scent greeted my nose, and a hint of the light, heady feeling returned.

Understanding dawned in Bayne's eyes and I clamped the bundle shut. Then I handed the handkerchief to him.

After he shoved it in his pocket, he made quick work of tugging my dress free, ripping the hem in the process.

"Sorry," he muttered, his fingers slowing as if trying to avoid any more damage.

"It's fine." I tugged and tore the hem as well. I'd rather have a ripped dress than Kartoff wondering what was holding us up.

"Let's go!" Kartoff barked, turning back to us, blade held high.

We continued making our way through the brambles, easily moving through the spot Kartoff had cut, him once again at our backs with his sword poised.

The moment we reached another thick patch of thorns, I purposely let my gown down, tangling it in the thicket once more.

"I'm caught again." I feigned annoyance, tugging at my skirt as I turned toward Kartoff, which only served to tangle it more.

Cursing me under his breath, Kartoff stepped past Bayne, and with a fierce swipe, began to hack my skirt free, not bothering to preserve the hem at all.

But the distraction was all Bayne needed. He pounced on Kartoff, pinning his sword arm to his side. Bayne snaked his other arm around Kartoff's neck and squeezed, his bicep bulging under his shirt, giving Kartoff no chance to escape. Then he pressed the open handkerchief full of flower petals against Kartoff's mouth and nose.

Kartoff's strangled protest was muffled against Bayne's tight hold, the handkerchief mashed against his face. Amidst the commotion, Kartoff's cat hissed as it weaved its way through the brambles back toward us. With his free hand, Kartoff clawed at Bayne's grip, but Bayne was stronger.

I fell to my knees, barely noticing the thorns that pierced my skin. I grabbed Kartoff's hand still clutching Bayne's sword and sank my teeth into

his flesh.

Another muffled protest from Kartoff and he dropped the sword. I scooped it up, while Kartoff continued to struggle.

Within seconds, his movements ceased. Still, Bayne held him, then Kartoff's body began to shimmer and shake until he faded before our eyes.

Just as Bayne and I had been transported somewhere else in this world while we slept, so was an unconscious Kartoff.

Bayne sucked in a deep breath, crumpling the handkerchief in his grip as his eyes found mine, full of admiration.

"It worked," he said.

Before I could reply, a sharp hiss sounded at our feet, and the silver-smiled cat raised a clawed paw, slashing Bayne across the shins.

Bayne yelped and stumbled backward, falling into the brambles. I lunged at the cat with the sword but the little fiend was too quick. With one more sharp hiss, it dove beneath the brambles and raced off, probably in search of its master.

"Are you all right?" I asked Bayne as he got to his feet, rubbing his thorn-pricked palms.

"Fine. A few thorns in my hands are better than being devoured by that monstrous cat."

"Let me see." I took Bayne's hands in mine, then turned both his palms over, running my thumb along the calluses between his wounds. Sure enough, a few thorns had lodged themselves into his skin.

"Hold still," I commanded and set to work dislodging them with my fingers. As I did, I couldn't help but notice how much larger Bayne's hands were than my own. How strong and capable they were, which was no surprise, for I had witnessed them wielding his sword many times since we'd started our journey together. And yet, I suspected they held a gentleness as well—much like the man himself—who was such a fortress, but at other times, unguarded, like when he had shared his past with me.

I looked up and the same paradox was present in his brown eyes as they met mine—strong yet gentle, steady but searching. My heartbeat quickened. Was he as confused by me as I was by him? Did he feel the same draw to me as I felt to him?

"All done." I stepped back, dropping his hand, yet the memory of his skin tingled on my fingertips.

“My thanks.” Bayne’s lips held a hint of a smile, but his gaze fell away as he stooped to pick up his sword. “Come on, let’s get out of here.” He began deftly slicing a path through the brambles. “We should move fast. Who knows when Kartoff will be back? All this run-in with him cost us was your dagger and some poison. Next time we might not be so lucky.”

I nodded and followed him, recalling Kartoff’s threat to deliver me to Abrax. I couldn’t bring myself to voice my fears to Bayne, knowing the questions they would invoke, but they lived in my mind just the same.

Chapter 13
- BAYNE -

“How long do you think we’ve been here?” Avi asked once we had made it past the brambles.

“It’s hard to say,” I said slowly, focusing on the sound of our boots trudging over moss and leaves. “It seems like time works differently here.”

“What do you mean?”

“The last time I was here, it felt like mere days, but when I returned to Fernshire, weeks had passed there.”

Avi glanced up at a break in the trees. “Is it ever night here?”

I followed her gaze to the hazy red sky, which was partly dark and partly bright. “It never seems to change. It’s almost half night and half day all the time.”

Avi nodded. “That is what it feels like.” Still, her gaze remained thoughtful and she asked her next question in almost a whisper, like she didn’t want to be overheard. “What do you think makes this world the way it is?”

“I’ve thought about that a lot . . . My best guess? I think it’s made up of our worst fears and darkest memories—the parts of ourselves we try to hide and the parts of our lives we try to forget.”

Avi swallowed slowly, no doubt processing this. She didn’t disagree, so I went on.

“And since we’re here together, I think we’re experiencing a blending of our worlds—or rather, our minds.”

Avi gave a short laugh, but her brow quickly furrowed. “That’s almost more terrifying than the world itself.”

“Indeed.” Especially for two people like us who, it seemed, had much we would rather keep hidden.

And yet, now that I’d told Avi my story, there was a part of me that was relieved. I had done so out of sheer practicality, for her safety, but sharing

that part of my life with her had brought with it a strange sense of freedom.

She hadn't judged me or scorned me.

She'd simply listened.

And by listening, she'd understood.

It wasn't often in my life that I'd felt heard or understood, yet this furtive woman beside me had accomplished both. It was strange, and perhaps strangest of all was the way it made me want to know her more. To know everything about her. What was she hiding? What was she afraid of? What ghosts from her past were we likely to encounter here?

But before I could ask, the sound of my name being carried on the wind made Avi and I both stop in our tracks.

"Bayne . . ."

"What was that?" Avi's eyes widened.

"Bayne . . . can you hear me?"

There it came again, a soft feminine voice.

"Alice?"

"It's Princess Opal!" Avi pushed through the trees, following the sound.

"Avi, wait!" I hurried after her. "It could be a trick."

Avi's steps faltered and she turned back to me. "You're right . . . we should be careful."

"Alice, can you hear me?"

The voice came again. We followed it together, slowly, weapons drawn.

Finally, we broke through the trees, which revealed a gushing waterfall splashing into a winding stream. Avi gasped and clutched my arm.

"Bayne, look!" She pointed to the waterfall. Princess Opal's face reflected through the ribbons of falling water. Her dark brows were drawn together, her face glistening in the sunlight.

"Of course . . ." I said to myself, following Avi. "Last time, they found a way to communicate with me in our world."

"Opal!" Avi splashed into the stream toward the waterfall, waving her hands, then she turned back to me. "Can she hear us?"

"Not quite. Last time, they couldn't hear anything I said. I was only able to communicate with gestures—head shakes, nods, and the like."

"Alice," Opal's waterfall visage responded, sounding relieved. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes!" Avi nodded vigorously.

I joined Avi's side and nodded over and over, speaking more for my own benefit than Opal's. "We're here. We can hear you."

"Bayne." Opal turned her eyes toward me. "We have both of you here at the Fernshire palace . . . safe." I knew that meant chained up so we couldn't hurt ourselves or others. "But"—she paused again like she didn't want to say her next words—"the Jabberwock is dead."

"We know." I nodded, pressing my lips into a grim line.

"We don't know how to get you out without it." Opal's brow furrowed. "Do you have any idea what we should do? Or how to escape on your end?"

I shook my head slowly.

Opal sighed, then gave a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, we'll keep working. We're doing everything we can . . ." She listed what else they were trying and whom they had contacted in hopes of finding a way to break our spell. While it was reassuring to know they were taking care of us, her words offered little comfort beyond that. What if there was no way to get us out without the Jabberwock?

"Bayne, what if this waterfall is a portal?" Avi stepped closer, examining it. "Back to our world? Like the doorway we passed through?" She turned to me, her eyes alight. "Maybe that's why we're able to communicate with Opal through it!"

I shook my head. "I don't think so . . . Last time, they used a mirror to communicate with me—"

Avi didn't heed me. Instead, she plunged directly through the waterfall.

"Avi!" I called after her, splashing through the stream.

No response but the rushing water.

I half expected her to pop her head back through the falling curtain and tell me there was nothing behind the fall at all.

But she didn't.

"Avi?" I rushed through the waterfall. All I saw was a gleaming wall of rock. Avi had disappeared.

"Avi!" I shouted and took another step. Had Avi been right? Had crossing through the waterfall brought her home?

And then the earth dropped out from under me.

❇❇❇

I was falling, air and water rushing past me so quickly that I didn’t even have time to cry out before I plunged into a freezing pool.

The weight of the water and the shock of its chill dragged me down, but I kicked and fought my way to the surface.

I blinked water from my eyes and scanned my surroundings. I was in a lake. A wide pool that looked more purple than blue, no doubt from the red sky. It was all around me with the shoreline visible in the distance.

“Avi!” I called out.

Nothing.

Dread filled my heart when I recalled what she had told me earlier in Kartoff’s wagon.

I can’t swim.

“Avi!” I treaded water, turning frantically, one way and then the next until I caught sight of her.

Ten yards away, a figure thrashed in the water. She was mostly underneath, barely visible beneath the surface with how tangled she was in my black cloak. For a moment, her hand shot above the water and then was gone.

I plunged back under, swimming toward her with all my might. As I got closer, I opened my eyes. Her body, though fighting, sank farther from me.

My lungs burned, but I didn’t swim toward air. I dove lower, fighting to reach Avi before the dark water pulled her away forever.

Harder and harder I kicked until my fingers closed around her arm.

I tried to tug her upward, but it was like trying to pull her from quicksand. She was too heavy and thrashing terribly. My water-soaked cloak around her shoulders pulled us both down.

I freed the clasp. I tugged Avi to me and kicked us both upward, holding her as securely as I could to stop her fighting. Did she even realize it was me who had grabbed her, or did she think I was a water creature from this world intent on dragging her to the lake’s darkest depths?

My lungs screamed for air, and I followed the bubbles from my mouth toward the surface.

Not much farther . . . My head felt dizzy and my vision blurred. *It’s not real,* I reminded myself. *Wherever you are, back in Fernshire, you can*

breathe. You have air.

But my mind couldn't believe it.

Just when I thought I might succumb to the darkness, I broke through the surface. Gasping, I sucked in a huge breath, relief filling my lungs. I tugged Avi's face out of the water and willed her to do the same, but all she did was cough.

She kicked and clawed at my shoulder, threatening to send us both under again.

"Stop, Avi," I managed to say as I shifted my hold on her and treaded water. "It's me."

More coughing and gasping, but her body relaxed.

"I've got you," I said more confidently, now that she had stopped fighting. "But I need you to be still so I can get to the shore. Can you do that?"

She didn't answer, just gave a barely audible wheeze, but the way she clung to me made me realize she knew I had her—that I wouldn't let her sink again.

After readjusting my hold, I slowly made my way toward the shore.

When I finally laid her dripping body on the embankment, I could barely breathe myself, completely exhausted from swimming and carrying her with me.

But I didn't have time to think about that.

Avi began coughing violently, her whole body trembling.

"Breathe, Avi," I commanded, turning her on her side, then struck her between the shoulder blades. "You can do it."

Water poured from her lips, but still, she shook violently. She was going into shock. I wondered if her body in Fernshire was reacting the same way at this very moment.

"It's all right, Avi." I tried to soothe her, rubbing her back. "Remember, you can breathe. This isn't real. Deep, slow breaths."

She didn't respond, her eyes bulging in between coughing fits. Her lips were blue and her skin was white, almost matching the pale dress clinging to her trembling body.

"Avi, please." My voice shook. Was her body giving out? If she passed out, would we be separated again? What if she stopped breathing and I couldn't find her in time?

In desperation, I pulled her into my arms, pressing her back against my chest, and laid my palm flat against her sternum to coax her breathing. Her hands hung limply at her sides.

“Breathe with me.” I drew in slow breaths. “In and out. You can do it. Stay with me.”

Chapter 14
- AVIVA -

“Breathe with me, Avi.”

The ragged command broke through the ringing in my ears.

“You can do it. In and out.”

I wanted to obey, but my mind didn’t seem to know how. I couldn’t even feel my body. All I felt was myself floating. Stars flashed across my eyes and I wasn’t even sure if my eyelids were open. I longed to succumb to the ringing in my ears and the call of darkness—to just let it overtake me.

“Breathe, please.” Again the desperate plea sounded in my ear, keeping me from floating away into unconsciousness.

I tried to respond, but I couldn’t catch my breath. My throat burned as if invisible hands were closing around it.

Pressure against my chest was the first sensation that returned.

I gasped.

Then I choked and coughed, and finally, heaved in a deep breath of air.

“Good, Avi, good!” The pressure on my chest was mirrored by a rise and fall at my back.

I blinked, struggling to catch my breath, as I processed the strong arms wrapped around me. Bayne’s large hand, fingers spread, pressed against my chest, coaxing me to breathe.

Bayne was holding me—clutching me, really—to his chest, guiding my breath in and out. It was working. My aching lungs pulled in air, despite the burning sensation that accompanied it.

“You did it,” Bayne said in my ear. I twisted to one side so I could look up at him. He reached out a shaking hand, his touch cold against my cheek, but welcome. He stroked my skin, his other arm still grasping me.

I turned fully and collapsed against him. His embrace encircled me, holding me like he would never let go. We were both dripping wet and freezing, but somehow, there was warmth between us.

“I thought I was losing you,” Bayne whispered into my hair. “I thought . . .”

“Where are we?” I glanced at the sky, the familiar red hue making my heart sink. “We’re still here.” My foolish hope that the waterfall had been a portal home evaporated.

“We’re still here.” Bayne nodded against my cheek. “But we’re together.”

I pulled back to look at him. “I shouldn’t have been so rash—”

“You didn’t know.” Bayne looked me in the eye. “You had hope. That’s important here—we need hope.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, shaking my head. “What good does it do? Everything here wants to kill us. We’re never going to get out.” I had no optimism left. What was this place but a land of madness? How long would we last like this when every twist and turn led us farther into a land of smoke and mirrors?

“We will.” Bayne curled one hand around my head. He wrapped his other hand around my fingers and squeezed them. “We’ll find a way.” He tilted his head toward mine. “And now we know not to go blindly rushing into waterfalls. Very clever of you.”

Despite myself, I laughed.

“Although I must confess . . .” Bayne’s voice turned serious again, his eyes steady. “Watching the life drain out of you was far more frightening to me than any trick we’ve faced here so far.”

Without warning, he brushed a lock of my wet hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering on my cheek. His breathing was labored, everything he’d done to save me no doubt taking a toll on him. His eyes turned soft and caring as they searched mine.

Flushing under his intent gaze, I glanced down. My lips tingled as I caught sight of his, so close to my own, his breath warming my cheek. I was practically sitting in his lap, our limbs tangled up together. For a moment, all else was forgotten. All I knew was a longing to close the space between us, to feel his lips on mine.

As if reading my mind, Bayne’s fingers at my cheek lowered, caressing my chin, then tilting it upward. Our gaze met once more, and his eyes were just as gentle as before, but a heat flared behind them, so intense that my breath caught in my throat.

A deep shudder racked my body, building at the base of my spine all the way up to the tips of my fingers.

“You’re freezing.” Bayne’s hand fell away, his words full of apprehension. He carefully lifted me from him, then set me on the ground. “Sit here and rest. I’ll build a fire.”

“Do you think that’s wise?” My voice shook, and not just from the cold. Exhilaration mingled strangely with nervousness, easing to disappointment, over what had almost—but hadn’t—happened between us. “Smoke could alert Kartoff to our whereabouts.”

Bayne made quick work gathering sticks and assembling them. “It’s a risk, but you need to get warm.” His cheeks tinged red when he glanced at me and then quickly away. For the next several minutes, he remained hyperfocused on his task. I didn’t have the energy to speak, still shivering as I was, so I simply watched his large hands and adept fingers as he assembled, then lit, the kindling.

“There.” He sat back on his knees as the fire began crackling lively, filling the air around us with warmth. “That should last long enough to get you dry.”

I scooted closer to it, palms up, relishing the sweet heat of the flames. “That feels wonderful.” With the warmth radiating toward me, my limbs moved easier and I twisted my dress in my hands, wringing excess water from the material.

“It’s a shame we lost my cloak.” Bayne stood with a frown, squeezing water from his tunic, then his eyes turned from the fire to study me. The concern in his gaze made my heart pick up its pace and made it impossible to forget the feel of being in his arms only moments ago.

“It wouldn’t do us much good all wet.” I wrapped my arms around myself, feeling more exposed by my longing for him and what had almost occurred between us than I felt by my wet, clinging gown.

“I suppose not.” Bayne didn’t return to my side. Instead, he turned his back to me, standing tall as he faced the forest, perhaps worried that a new threat might come barreling through the trees at any moment. He glanced back at me. “Rest as long as you need. I’ll keep watch.”

“Thank you.” With a half-relieved, half-disappointed sigh, I returned my attention to the fire. My thoughts settled into place, like the sticks as the crackling blaze slowly broke them down.

It was for the best that Bayne and I hadn’t crossed the line of taking our alliance into more intimate territory. No good could come from it but further confusion. And besides, distractions were not a luxury we could afford here. Even the smallest one could cost us our lives.

But as I periodically glanced at the man standing stalwart across the fire, I couldn’t help but muse at the unexpectedness of it all.

I’d lived for years with my broken heart safely locked away, nothing in Fernshire ever giving me reason to lower the walls I’d built around myself after Abrax’s betrayal. I’d even crossed paths with Bayne countless times and never paid him any mind, thinking I knew all there was to know about him.

How wrong I was.

And now that I truly knew him, I feared I would never be the same again. Although my body was back in Fernshire, I had no doubt my heart had journeyed here to this odd land with me.

And with every passing moment, I was in danger of losing it completely.

Chapter 15
- BAYNE -

After putting out the fire and leaving the lake behind, Avi and I trudged through the forest in silence.

Something had shifted between us in the moments between when I'd pulled her from the water and she'd warmed herself by the fire. And although I wasn't the most perceptive or well-practiced in matters of the heart, even I could identify what it was.

I was falling for this woman.

It was the only conclusion I could come to as I'd stood gazing into the dark forest while Avi sat by the fire. Every part of me had longed to return to her side and hold her in my arms, just to know she was safe and feel her heartbeat against mine. And I certainly wasn't opposed to the thought of picking up where we'd left off.

But in the end, practicality had won out. Now was not the time for exploring whatever was growing between us. Our future was uncertain, and likely growing shorter by the day. I had nothing real to offer her—I couldn't even guarantee that I could keep her safe.

Moreover, there was a hesitancy about her. If I didn't know better, I may have mistaken it for shyness. But I knew this horse-stealing, dragon-slaying woman was anything but timid. Still, something was preventing her from drawing closer to me. Perhaps the tenderness stirring in my chest was one-sided, but whatever it was, I had a feeling there was a wall between us that she was intent on keeping up.

So we continued in relative silence, only broken by occasional remarks about the oddities we passed on our way—a waterfall that flowed upward from a stream to the base of a cliff; a large tree with playing cards instead of leaves; and a sign that pointed up, down, left, and right all at once, declaring the words *This Way*, as if it offered any guidance at all.

Despite those oddities, nothing confused me as much as the woman ambling beside me through the forest. Although I had many questions for her on the tip of my tongue, I kept them at bay.

I couldn't quite tell if Avi was feeling equally as conflicted. But I was relieved to note that the rest seemed to have done her good. Her steps were steady and she showed no signs of a prolonged chill.

Before long, our path was blocked by thick vines draping down like a curtain.

"What do you suppose is behind that?" Avi asked, staring up at the cascading green leaves.

"No idea. But I don't think we have much choice but to find out. Stay behind me." I stepped in front and grabbed her hand. "And we should stay together."

Avi nodded, her grip tightening, and I tried to tell myself her fingers woven through mine were merely for practicality's sake. But still, a comfort settled in my heart at the feel of Avi's slender hand. This felt right for reasons beyond sticking together.

With my free arm, I thrust the vines aside and took a careful step into darkness. I held my breath, wondering if the ground was about to drop out from under us as it had at the waterfall.

But no, we slowly made our way through the shrouding foliage, and what we found on the other side rendered me speechless.

We were in a vast grove, a clearing that had been set up with all manner of garden games—a seemingly innocent diversion. A table by a lilac bush was laid out with a chess set. Another table, low to the ground with a checkered blanket spread out underneath, held a stack of playing cards. Not far off stood a proud maypole with colorful streamers fluttering in the gentle breeze. And perhaps most whimsical of all was the croquet set in the middle of the grove, silver hoops stuck into the ground, gleaming in the scarlet sunlight. Identical striped stakes protruded from the ground at either end, and wooden mallets stood propped against a tree.

"Games." I broke the silence first, my tone dry. "How fitting . . . Somehow, I get the feeling none of this is meant to be fun for us."

"I know this place," Avi said with a quick shake of her head. "I mean, I've been here before."

"You have?" I turned my attention to her.

“Yes. One year, I took my sister to the May Day festival in the village. It was set up just like this.” Avi smiled, but her expression was tinged with sadness. “She said it was the best day of her life.”

“I see . . .” My voice died away as Avi’s feet led us to the center of the grove, where red sunlight streamed through the break in the trees. I recalled how she had spoken of her sister when we first met in the forest—how she’d been tragically separated from her and even thought she may be dead. No doubt this place invoked bittersweet memories for Avi.

She let go of my hand, then picked up a croquet mallet and shut her eyes, as if she was reveling in a dream—or more likely, a memory. Warmth spread through my body from the sight of her standing so content, and the scent of fresh-trimmed grass tickled my nose.

“How does this place make you feel?” I asked Avi softly, not wanting to infringe on whatever memory she was connecting with here—but also not wanting her to get too caught up in it.

“Happy,” she said, opening her eyes to meet mine. “But also incredibly sad.”

“What happened to your sister?” I asked carefully.

“I’m not entirely sure . . . all I know is that I failed her terribly.”

As she said the words, I saw the same regret in her eyes that I had seen in my own reflection for so many years. I took her hand and squeezed it. “When we get out of here, I’ll help you search for her. I promise.”

“Thank you.” Her eyes brightened, just slightly as she squeezed my hand in return, then she pulled away, glancing around. “Why do you think the world brought us here?”

“I’ve been thinking a lot about how this world operates . . . It seems to be made up of our darkest fears and our worst memories. Or in this case, the bittersweet ones—happy memories that have become sad because of what we lost.”

She walked over to an assortment of colored balls in the grass and picked a red one up. “Do you think we’re in danger?”

I turned and examined the scene. It was strangely peaceful. I shook my head. “At the moment, I don’t think so, but . . .” I scooped up a blue-striped croquet mallet and examined it.

“What are you doing?” Avi asked.

I held the wooden mallet out in front of me, then spun it in my hand. It was quite sturdy. “Testing to see if this could be used as a weapon.” I quirked my brow. “I wouldn’t mind cracking Kartoff’s skull with it.”

Avi laughed and stepped toward me. “Ever the practical knight . . .” She lowered my mallet to the ground. “Play a game with me?” She dropped the red ball between a stake and two identical hoops, then looked up with hopeful eyes.

“Very well.” I could tell this place had a draw for Avi and she wasn’t ready to leave it just yet. And there was no reason to believe we were in any greater danger here than we were in the rest of the forest. I pushed up the sleeves of my forearms. “But I must warn you, I’m woefully out of practice.”

“I promise I will keep my mocking to a minimum.” She smiled broadly, obviously delighted that I was joining in. Her smile warmed my heart as she hit her ball through the two hoops, then again into the playing field. It landed several yards away, perfectly lined up for her next shot.

“Here goes.” I dropped my ball where Avi had started and sent it through the two hoops with the side of my mallet. I flipped my mallet and struck the ball with such force it whizzed past Avi’s and into the nearby bushes. I cursed under my breath, and Avi burst out laughing.

“Why, Sir Bayne,” Avi said, placing a hand on her heart in feigned shock. “I didn’t realize you had such a competitive streak.”

“It’s my darkest secret.” I strode toward the bush to join my ball, a smile playing around the edges of my lips over Avi’s obvious delight at my lack of skills. “Garden games bring out my worst side.”

“Thank goodness.” Avi lifted her eyes toward the warm rays of red sunshine. “I was starting to believe you didn’t have any weaknesses.” She tapped her smiling lips thoughtfully. “Can’t say I was expecting croquet to be your undoing, but I’m pleased to have this knowledge.”

“Trust me, it’s not my only weakness.” If today had taught me anything, it was that.

“Well then . . .” Avi rested one hand on the top of her mallet, then tossed her still-damp, slightly tangled waves over her shoulder. She took another well-placed shot. “I look forward to learning what the others are.”

I didn’t respond for a moment, too focused on my next shot, narrowing my eyes as I adjusted my stance, but Avi’s good humor was infectious and I

couldn’t help but quip, “I look forward to that too.”

Crack!

My shot sent the ball flying, landing in the grass a few strokes from Avi’s.

“Not bad,” she commented as she strode to her ball. “Perhaps you won’t be such a pitiful opponent after all.”

“Perhaps you’ll find you’ve finally met your match,” I said in her ear as I passed by and took a spot at her side, waiting as she took her turn.

“Perhaps you’ll find I’m not so easy to keep up with.” Avi lifted an eyebrow in response to my obvious flirtation, then sent her ball through the hoop with ease. She finished her turn by taking another long shot toward the next hoop.

“Perhaps you’ll find I’m not so easily deterred.” I didn’t miss a beat, enjoying this verbal sparring even more than our croquet match. With a swift crack, I sent my ball through the hoop as well, an impressive shot given the distance. I lifted my gaze to hers, letting her know I wasn’t just talking about this game.

“And perhaps, you’ll finally agree”—I swung my mallet again and sent my ball crashing into hers to prove my point—“the two of us colliding was not such a bad thing after all.”

“Well, not for you.” Avi placed a hand on her hip as she watched her ball roll off toward the trees. “You just earned two extra shots, and I’ve practically been exiled.”

“In that case . . .” I laughed and struck my ball twice in quick succession, causing it to land next to hers under the tree. “Allow me to be of some assistance.”

She laughed, shaking her head as she strode toward both our balls. “That was silly. You just wasted your shots.”

“Nothing’s a waste if it brings me closer to you,” I said with absolute certainty, following her.

We both stopped under a large tree where our balls had landed, and I absentmindedly pressed a hand against the tree trunk, smiling down at Avi. We didn’t touch, but every inch of me was aware of her. Of the limited distance between us. Of the hesitant smile on her lips and the question in her eyes. Of how easy it would be to close the space between us—literally

and figuratively. Of how much I wanted to as our breaths mingled and the air between us thickened.

“You, sir”—Avi pressed a firm hand against my shoulder, pushing me back—“are in my shot.”

“How inconsiderate of me.” I took a step back, my hand falling away, fighting back a laugh. “I can see you take this game quite seriously.”

Avi didn’t reply as she struck her ball, sending it back into open territory. Following it, she cast an accusatory look over her shoulder. “I fear you aren’t properly heeding the rules of the game.”

“Is that so?” Humor laced my tone as I took my turn, but my mind wasn’t focused on croquet. “I thought you were the one who said I was a stringent knight.”

“Did I?” Avi feigned innocence as she sent her ball through the middle hoop.

“Yes, and you were very clear to point out that it was not a compliment.” I scratched the back of my neck. “I fear no man could ever suffer from an overinflated ego with you around.”

Avi laughed. “I think what I meant to say was that you were the most unique knight I’d ever met. Does that satisfy your ego?”

“That depends on your definition of *unique*.”

“Ah, I suppose it does. Well, then let me make myself clear—”

“Am I going to need my armor for this?” I grimaced, half wondering if she was preparing to hurl insults at me.

“Hardly.” She scoffed, then rested her hands on the end of her mallet and looked me straight in the eye. “I was going to say you are the most remarkable knight I have ever met—selfless, loyal, and brave. I’m quite certain I could search this world ten times over—and our own—and never find one quite like you.” She paused, her gaze softening. “I don’t know what trick of fate it was that led to us colliding, as you put it, but I suspect I will long be grateful that we did.”

That was much better than insults. My throat constricted, but I held her gaze. “As will I.”

She blinked, giving no reply, but her smile said it all.

I swallowed and went on. “And let me state that you are the most remarkable healer, turned maid, turned dragon-slayer that I have ever met.”

She laughed. “How many of those have you met?”

“Thankfully, just you. I’m not sure I would survive an encounter with another.”

Avi made a face, then turned her attention back to the game. I couldn’t help but smile to myself—or maybe *at* myself—for the dance that was going on between us.

Even though she had pulled away from me at the tree, the draw I felt had seemed reciprocated, only to be cut off at the last second. I didn’t want to push her, but the things I’d begun feeling for her were unlike anything I’d ever experienced. I longed to ask her if I was misguided, but at the same time, I was uncertain how to put my feelings into words.

Brave, she had called me. Perhaps for things I had been trained for, like swordplay and battle strategy. But expressing my feelings to this extraordinary, yet guarded, woman was something I was woefully ill-prepared for.

Chapter 16
- AVIVA -

After I defeated Bayne in croquet and we left the garden games behind, my heart was still fluttering erratically. And not from the sweetness of my victory. No, it had everything to do with the sweetness of Bayne's words and even his actions—we were on a mission to find a way out of this strange place, and yet, he'd taken the time to revisit that tender memory with me.

When we'd first stumbled on the scene, my thoughts had turned to Laurel, and that familiar pang had pricked my heart. It was a happy memory, turned sad, somehow made happy again with that man by my side. For the first time in ages, I had felt what it would be like to make new memories. To care for someone again. To allow myself to be cared for.

It was so tempting to let my walls down and let him in completely. With every passing moment, I wanted nothing more.

But still, I held back. Bayne may have begun to care for me, but he didn't know the whole story. He didn't know all of what I'd done and the person I'd once been. Even more terrifying than the thought of giving in to the growing tenderness in his eyes would be watching it fade completely.

Once we had gone a considerable distance through the trees, I glanced up at Bayne. "Did this world ever bring you to any bittersweet memories last time you were here?"

"It did. But it didn't involve playing croquet, I can assure you." He cast me a wry smile.

"You're just mad I beat you." I smiled back, knowing full well he most likely would have won if he hadn't so foolishly struck his ball toward the trees after mine.

"I bet you can't wait to tell Princess Opal how you bested me."

I laughed. This silly banter was exactly what I needed to shake the fading longing I still felt for the scene from my past we'd left behind. Bayne's

quips and steady steps beside me were the perfect reminder of what was at stake—that we needed to find a way out of here.

Bayne went on. “Last time, this world led me to the spot where Rowan used to train me.” He gave a quick head shake. “It’s strange how something so ordinary, so unappreciated at the time, can seem so valuable the moment it’s lost to you.”

I nodded, understanding his meaning perfectly.

“Avi, look.” Bayne pointed to something in the distance between the trees and I followed his gaze.

Standing on its own, just beyond the forest line, was the same tall, ornate grandfather clock we had seen when we first passed through to this place.

“It’s that clock,” I said when we reached it, spying the same cryptic inscription on top and the same clockface with its hands ticking backward, now closer to twelve. And the same mirror on the door, except— “We look different.” I stood mesmerized by the glass. “Now . . .”

Bayne finished my words. “We’re just shadows.”

Sure enough, both of our reflections stood in the mirror, but instead of just being clothed in red as before, we both looked like red-garbed ghosts. We were almost translucent, the trees showing through behind us in the background.

“What do you think it means?” I shivered, more from the odd sight than the cold.

“It might mean nothing.” Bayne's eyes fixed on the glass-enclosed clockface on top. “Or . . .”

“Or what?”

“It may be showing a reflection of our true selves—the ones we left in Fernshire. I fear we’re fading more there every minute. Becoming more and more a part of this world.”

“So you’re saying we’re disappearing from the real world?”

“Our minds, at least.”

“What happens if we fade completely?”

“It may mean we’re out of time.” He pointed to the clockface at the top center of the frame. “The hands are moving backward. Like they’re counting down to something.”

I wrung my hands. “So you’re saying we have a limited amount of time to get out of this place? And once that clock hits twelve, we’re done?”

“I don’t know.” Frustration laced Bayne’s every word. “It’s just a suspicion. I don’t know anything here.” He rubbed his brow wearily, and I couldn’t help but notice the dark circles under his eyes. “Just when I think I have something figured out, it tosses something new at us.”

“Well, we know we still have a connection to our world,” I said, trying to reason through it. “We spoke to Opal not long ago. How was she able to communicate with us?”

“A mirror. The ability to communicate happens when someone in our world catches our gaze in a mirror.”

“A mirror . . . so many mirrors,” I mused. “First, you were able to control the Jabberwock by looking at it through a mirror. And it’s also the link from this world to ours.” I stared at my shadowy, red-clad reflection. “And this mirror has appeared twice—somehow it must be the key.” I glanced at the inscription on top, searching for a solution, then back down at our translucent reflections. Bayne stood behind me, his eyebrows drawn, as if trying to figure out the riddle himself.

I held my hand up, my reflection fingers meeting my own, but all I touched was cool glass. I startled slightly. In the reflection, the tips of my fingers darkened a deep red. As if stained with blood.

A dark shadow crept behind us in the mirror and I whipped around.

There was no one there.

“What is it?” Bayne asked beside me, but I didn’t respond.

Instead, I twirled back and faced the looking glass. The shadow shifted into focus.

A familiar face.

King Abrax, grinning at me. Mocking me.

In his hand, he held a steaming cup of tea. He raised it with a wicked twist of his lips as if toasting me.

“No,” I whispered, turning again to make sure that man hadn’t appeared behind us.

Again, no one was there.

But that didn’t calm my galloping heart. He *was* here. Somewhere. Hadn’t Kartoff implied as much?

“Avi, what is it?” Bayne gripped my shoulders. “What do you see?”

“He’s here . . . He’s here.” I was rambling now, as I turned against Bayne’s hold to look behind me. Abrax was here, just like he was always in

the back of my mind, reminding me of what I had done.

“Who’s here?” Bayne asked, giving me a gentle shake.

I didn’t answer. Instead, I broke free of his grip and shoved the giant clock with all my might, sending it toppling into the forest.

Abrax’s taunting grin was the last thing I saw before the mirror tipped and was swallowed up by the leafy branches.

Chapter 17
- BAYNE -

"Avi, what is it?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

After the giant clock crashed into the forest, she finally turned to me, her eyes wild, wide, and fearful.

"He's here," she said again. "I saw him. He's found me."

"Who's here? Avi, please, whatever it is, you can tell me."

She didn't answer, her chest rising and falling with heavy breaths.

I grabbed her hand, leading her away, then sat her down upon a large rock and knelt in front of her.

"Avi, whatever you saw—it's a trick." I looked her in the eye. "This place wants to drive us mad. That's why I saw my father. It takes the worst parts of our lives—our worst memories and our darkest fears—and throws them back at us in a mockery."

"What if we aren't meant to get out of here?" she asked. "What if all this is, is a punishment for the things we've done? The things *I've* done . . ." She buried her face in her hands.

I froze for a moment, watching her. Was she right? Was it true? Heaven knew the guilt that had eaten away at me for years. How I'd caused my brother's death. How I'd ruined my father's mind. No matter all the ways I'd tried to atone for that, had it all come down to this? Did I deserve to be trapped in this world of madness because there was no recovering from the things I'd done? How many times in my heart had I feared just that?

But as I gazed back at the broken woman in front of me, I couldn't quite believe it. Yes, I had done terrible things, and from the sound of it, so had Avi, but that wasn't all there was to her.

"Avi," I said gently. "Whatever's happened, whatever you've done. That isn't the only part of your story. I've seen you—the bravest, best part of you. You sacrificed yourself to save Fernshire. You're a hero."

Finally, she raised her head, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Avi, what are you running from?” I asked softly.

“I made mistakes.” She shook her head roughly. “Terrible mistakes.”

“We all make mistakes. But mistakes can be rectified.”

“Not the ones I made. Not deadly mistakes.”

A lump formed in my throat. I, too, had made deadly mistakes. We had more in common than I’d realized.

“What happened?” I asked.

She gave a tremulous sigh, then words poured out. “Like I already told you, I was a healer in Tover. I lived there with my sister for years. Our parents died when we were young, and as the eldest, I took care of her. I did the best I could, but some days it wasn’t enough. She still went hungry. We still ran out of wood in the winter. There still wasn’t enough money to put shoes on both our feet.

“I was well respected in the village and good at what I did, but many of the people I helped couldn’t pay much for my services. Oh, we got by, but one day I met a man.”

I stilled, letting her go on.

“He came across me when I was gathering herbs in the forest. He was quite amiable and very handsome. He asked what I was doing, and I explained the herbs I was gathering could be used to treat ailments. He thought it was fascinating, and it wasn’t long before he was meeting me there every day.

“He said I was the cleverest woman he’d ever met. He asked me to tell him all about the plants’ healing powers. He was so attentive, so charming. It wasn’t long before I fancied myself completely in love with him—and him with me. It wasn’t just his flattery and attention either. He was an important man—the king’s brother.”

“Abrax?” I asked, the pieces coming together.

She nodded. “But it wasn’t long before the questions he asked me changed. He was no longer interested in what could heal but what could destroy—what could kill. Oh, he played it off as nothing but mere curiosity, but then he asked me to create things for him.”

“What kind of things?”

“Poisons. He said it was for rats, and foolish, lovesick girl that I was, I believed him.” She looked at her hands. “At least I told myself that I did. In

the back of my mind, I feared there was something rotten lurking under his perfect exterior. But I didn't want to admit it.

"He promised me things. Said it wouldn't be long before we would be married. That no one else knew, but his brother's health was failing, which was why King Edmond had called him to Tover in the first place. So he could prepare him to take over when the time came.

"I believed him, but it was all a lie. His brother's health wasn't failing until Abrax started poisoning him—poisoning him with the poison *I* gave him. I didn't know until it was too late—and even then, I tried to convince myself it was some mistake. That Abrax wouldn't do such a thing.

"My sister"—her voice cracked—"realized the truth far before I did. She didn't trust Abrax and she begged me not to either, but I didn't listen.

"One day not long after King Edmond's death, Abrax sent knights to our cottage. He knew I had grown suspicious, and he feared I could reveal what he'd done. He ordered his knights to kill us—claimed we were dangerous witches practicing black magic who needed to be stopped. They set fire to our cottage. Kartoff was his henchman. He grabbed me, pulled me outside, and stabbed me. That's the last thing I remember. I almost died—I *should* have died—but one of the knights who was tasked with burying me discovered I was alive. He knew Abrax was lying, and he faked my burial and hid me. He and his wife took care of me and we traveled to Fernshire together. But my sister—" Her voice broke, but she pressed on.

"My sister was not so lucky. One of Abrax's knights killed her. I've lived with her death on my hands ever since. And the death of King Edmond." She shook her head. "That must be why I'm dressed all in red in that mirror—why my fingers are stained red. Because of the blood on my hands." She bowed her head in shame.

"Avi." I took her hand in mine. "Listen to me, you are *not* a murderer. You didn't plot King Edmond's death. You didn't know." As I said the words that I believed with my whole heart, I couldn't help but notice how they mirrored the ones Avi had uttered to me about my past. Why was it that we could so easily believe the best about each other, but not believe it about ourselves?

Avi looked up at me with tear-filled eyes. "Ignorance is not an excuse. And what of my greed? My obstinance? My pride? Are those not deadly too?" She shook her head. "I may not have given King Edmond the cup, but

I brewed the tea that killed him. And my sister . . . I may not have wielded the sword, but my actions killed her."

"Your sister . . ." Our first conversation, now seeming so long ago, made much more sense now, and Avi's desperation to return to Tover. "You told me your sister might still be alive. That you were trying to find her in Tover."

"On a fool's errand. On a hope so dim, I'm probably fooling myself for believing it at all . . . But on the night of Princess Opal's betrothal ball, the Queen of Tover was there. Queen Roselynn, King Edmond's daughter, and I overheard her. She spoke a name—my sister's name, Laurel. She was referring to a woman living in Tover. Of course, it could be an entirely different Laurel, and sometimes I wonder if maybe I imagined her speaking it at all. But I had to find out . . . Not knowing, it was driving me mad. It took me a few weeks to formulate a plan, but that's why I stole Opal's horse. Why I was so desperate to get to Tover."

"Of course you were." I squeezed her hand. I couldn't fault her for it. But then a thought came to me. "Avi—have you seen your sister *here*?"

"Here? No."

"But you saw King Abrax, correct?"

She nodded. "In the mirror."

"And I saw my father—both of them are dead . . . So if you haven't seen your sister, perhaps it means—"

Her eyes lit up. "She really is alive."

Chapter 18
- AVIVA -

“How I pray she is.” I squeezed my eyes shut. “If I could know that for certain—know my sister is alive and well and happy . . .” I gave a sad smile. “I wouldn’t even lament being stuck in this place.”

Bayne tugged me up and then reached out and brushed a hand to my cheeks, drying my tears. “If we can find a way to communicate with Opal again, perhaps we can ask her to send someone to Tover in search of your sister.”

“But we fell through the waterfall. How will we find a way to talk to her?”

“We may have to wait until she tries to communicate with us. But I suppose we could start with the mirror.” He led me back toward the forest line where I had pushed the mirror.

“If we can. I may have broken it.” I recalled how forcefully I had shoved the clock over. At the time, it had given me great satisfaction, but now, I worried I might have destroyed my one chance of getting answers.

While I didn’t relish the thought of seeing Abrax in the glass again, with Bayne next to me—his hand in mine and his strong, unwavering presence—I no longer felt afraid. And if I could discover what happened to Laurel, I would risk it.

But when we got to the spot where I’d pushed the clock over, although there were cracked branches and a dent in the foliage, it was empty.

“This was where it was, correct?” Bayne asked.

I nodded, not sure whether to be relieved or worried.

“It’s gone,” Bayne said, then he rubbed his temple. “Just as oddly as it appeared, now it’s disappeared again.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “We’ll find another way to talk to Opal.”

Bayne nodded and we journeyed on. It wasn’t until he stumbled over a root protruding from the ground that I turned to study him. I noticed how

tired his eyes were. How dark the circles underneath them were. I could only assume he was as exhausted as I felt.

“Bayne, have you slept at all since we’ve been here?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Only the little after I succumbed to the flower garden, and I fear we shouldn’t. I don’t want us to be separated again.”

I swallowed, not wanting that either. “I haven’t since then either. But I’m so tired.” After what I’d just confessed to Bayne, revealing the darkness of my past that I’d been so intent on keeping hidden, I felt physically and mentally spent.

“We shouldn’t need it here—our bodily needs don’t need to be met, remember?” Bayne squared his shoulders, blinking repeatedly as if fighting off his exhaustion.

“Sleep isn’t just rest for the body. It’s rest for the mind too—and that, I fear, we need. Especially if we expect to think straight.”

“You’re right . . .” Bayne rubbed his head again and made a disgruntled sound. “So if this place doesn’t drive us mad, a lack of sleep surely will.” His tired eyes met mine. “But what if we’re separated again? It’s not worth the risk.”

“We were separated, but you *did* find me. And we can’t stay awake indefinitely—you’re literally falling asleep on your feet. We’ll just have to try something else.” I pointed to a cluster of trees that would offer us some shelter. “Sit before you fall over.”

Bayne complied, leaning against a tree trunk in a half-sitting position. His heavy eyelids closed. “I’ll just rest my eyes for a few minutes.”

I shook my head, although he couldn’t see me, and then I lowered myself to the ground next to him, lifting his arm to press my back against his chest.

He startled slightly. “What are you doing?”

I reached for his arm and laid it back across my waist, then turned my head to face him. “If we stay together—physically—perhaps we won’t be separated when we fall asleep.”

He pondered this for a moment, and I thought he might fight me on it like he had when we’d shared his cloak in the cave. But finally, he said, “Let’s hope. But if we *do* get separated, stay where you are as long as it’s safe. I’ll find you.”

“I will.”

With that, he relaxed his arms around me, his tired eyes fluttering closed. I shut my eyes too, willing the sleep I so longed for to claim me, but I found my mind suddenly alert. I was too aware of Bayne's protective embrace, his soft breath brushing past my cheek, and his rhythmic heartbeat thrumming at my back.

It wasn't the first time I'd been in his arms—and once again, it was for practical purposes—yet I wanted to cherish the moment, to not let it pass too quickly. How I appreciated his nearness—his realness—and the fact that he hadn't left me to face this world alone. The thought filled me with a myriad of conflicting emotions.

"Bayne," I said softly. "I'm sorry I dragged you into this. That you came back to this place because of me. I'm so grateful you're here, but at the same time, I wish you weren't. I wish you were back in Fernshire—safe."

He shifted, turning me toward him, his eyes open again. They were sincere, just like his voice. "I don't regret it for a moment."

"How could you not?" I stared at him, aghast.

His lips twitched into a small smile. "Because I'm starting to realize that my life there—although it was reality—was far less real than this one."

"What do you mean?" I searched his gaze.

He exhaled slowly, his breath tickling my cheek. "You once asked me if I was in love with Princess Opal—do you recall?"

"Yes." My cheeks flushed slightly. I had only asked it to get a rise out of him, but now the question carried a much different weight to it.

"Of course, the answer is no. My heart never belonged to another in that manner. And in fact, I never thought it would . . ." His words trailed off as he swallowed, long and hard. "Until now."

Two words had never struck me with such impact.

"Bayne . . ." My word was meant to be a warning, but it came out like a question. A wild hope that he somehow returned what was stirring in my heart, even after I'd confessed my darkest secret to him.

"Tell me I'm not mad for thinking it." He reached up, cradling my cheek. "Tell me this isn't all some cruel trick of this world—that I'm not imagining whatever's between us. Tell me your heart is open to mine."

I sucked in a deep breath, closing my eyes, and leaned into the gentle touch of his large, calloused palm against my cheek. Even though we were in a dream world, I felt the heat of his skin to my core. At that moment, I

wanted to sink into it. His nearness was doing strange and wonderful things to my heart. While both our movements ceased and our words stopped forming, my pulse picked up twofold. And with Bayne pressed so close to me, I could feel the rhythm of his heartbeat quickening.

Somehow, I found my words. “My heart is more than just open to yours. It *is* yours.”

He exhaled softly, a sigh of relief, pressing his forehead against mine. “You don’t know how much I’ve been wanting to hear you say that.”

“But how can you?” I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to calm my racing heart to no avail. “After everything I just told you—everything I did?”

“Your mistakes don’t make you unlovable, Avi. They’re a part of you, but they’re not *all* of you. They don’t change how I feel about you. I know who you really are.”

I opened my eyes and met Bayne’s sincere gaze. “Do you truly mean that?”

“I do. And I want nothing more than to show you how much I care for you.” He stroked my cheek. “How much I cherish you.”

“Then show me.” My words were only a whisper, but they carried with them the final surrender of my heart. I could no longer deny that I hadn’t lost it to him, piece by broken piece, every moment since we’d started this crazy journey. Bayne had taken those pieces and put them back together, making my heart whole once more, something I hadn’t even believed was possible until he’d done it.

In a rush, Bayne’s mouth closed over mine and my newly mended heart soared. Perhaps it was madness, but I kissed him back. Fully. Freely. I turned into his embrace, and both his arms encircled me, pulling me closer, his hands strong and sure against my back.

Time ceased to matter as we kissed with abandon. There was a passion simmering inside this man that I never would have imagined. He was always so stoic—so calm and levelheaded. Yet every press of his lips against mine was deeper and more insistent than the last.

But at the same time, his kiss was sure and steady, and wrapped in his fervor was a beautiful promise that he would cherish me, keep me, love me. And I, him.

Until reality hit me with all the destructive force of delicate china shattering upon the floor.

I was promising him something that could never be.

I pulled back, dragging my lips from his with a sharp gasp.

“We shouldn’t—” I pressed a hand to his chest, grounding myself as my head spun and my breath shook.

His breath was just as ragged. “You’re right.” He rubbed my shoulders as if steadying me—or perhaps steadying himself. He glanced around the forest, no doubt ensuring that nothing sinister had snuck up on us while we were so distracted. But that wasn’t why our kiss was so dangerous.

He grasped my hand and brought it to his lips. “But when all of this is over. When we make it out of here . . .” He leaned back against the tree and shut his eyes, cradling my hand to his chest, his words fading in an unspoken promise.

And I let him rest, relieved he couldn’t see the tear that trickled down my face as I gazed at him. My heart broke once more, for I knew the truth.

That even if we made it out of here, I would never be free.

Chapter 19
- BAYNE -

Even before I opened my eyes, I knew Avi was no longer with me by the emptiness of my arms.

I blinked, banishing sleep completely, my clouded mind becoming alert once more. I recalled the kiss we had shared, and my heart knew joy over the way our relationship had shifted—how our trust and care for each other had deepened.

But the fact that we'd been separated dampened my happiness. While my tired mind was now refreshed, I hoped it hadn't come at too great of a cost.

"Avi?" I sat up and looked around. I wasn't in the forest anymore. I was under hedges in a garden facing an enormous castle. The sky, still red, almost seemed darker, like a storm was approaching.

Stone steps led up to the castle entrance where people milled about, heading inside. I was surprised to see so many bodies. Except for Kartoff and my father, Avi and I had been mostly alone in this place. Who were all these people? And was Avi among them?

I jumped to my feet and followed the queue, searching for her, or signs of a threat, but no one seemed to pay me any mind. Everyone was dressed for a ball, with ornate masquerade masks upon their faces.

I glanced down and saw I was no longer wearing the simple white tunic and trousers from earlier. Now I was garbed in a white dress tunic, complete with a sweeping white cape stitched with silver thread. The kind of thing a knight would wear if he were being honored at a ball such as this one. I fit right in, except my face was the only one bare of masked adornment.

The half-concealed faces sent a chill through me. Not only would they make it harder for me to find Avi, but I didn't trust who—or what—might be lurking underneath them.

"Avi!" I called as I bounded up the stone stairs. Several guests stopped and stared at me, but I only paid them enough mind to check that they

weren’t Avi. I didn’t recognize any of the faces, but perhaps I wasn’t meant to. Were they merely phantoms?

Most made their way into the castle, but a few simpler-dressed individuals milled around outside with paintbrushes in their hands, painting the blooms of the white rose bushes a dark red. I suppressed a shiver at the odd sight.

When I entered the ballroom, I slowed my steps. Whatever harm this place had in store for Avi and me next, it was probably wise to be discreet.

I scanned the crowd. The glittering gowns and jewels dazzled my eyes the way the fragrant red and white roses in vases around the room dazzled my nose. Countless candelabras lit every corner, and a huge glowing chandelier was suspended above the ballroom. It was light enough to see, but the movements, colors, and sparkle of the dancing crowd made it hard for me to focus on anything.

But then I found her.

Like me, Avi wore no mask, but her simple traveling gown had been transformed into a flowing white ball gown. Sheer full-length sleeves puffed from her shoulders, tapering at the wrists, and the dress cut daringly down her lithe back. A wreath of white roses encircled her honey-blonde curls.

She looked like a queen.

“Avi,” I called through the crowd, but she didn’t hear me. As I got closer, I realized she was dancing with a man—if you could call it dancing.

She was locked in his grip, one of her wrists enclosed in his hand, his other arm around her waist possessively. She struggled against him as he pulled her close, alarm flashing across her face.

I pushed through the crowd and drew my sword, pointing it at the man when I got close enough for him to hear. “Let her go.”

“Bayne, don’t!” Avi cried the moment her eyes locked with mine, her distress heightening. “Get away from here.”

The man, however, loosened his grip on her and turned slowly toward me. His face spread into a spiteful smile, highlighted by his perfectly trimmed black goatee surrounding his white teeth. He was dressed like a king with a black brocade jacket perfectly tailored to his chest. A sword was strapped around his waist, the hilt of it inlaid with rubies and onyx,

matching the crown upon his head. The jewels gleamed in the candlelight, just like his jet-black hair.

“So this is your latest conquest, Aviva?” He thrust Avi away and she stumbled back. He sneered at her. “A knight? Most surprising.”

Avi steadied herself as she rubbed her wrist where his hand had clamped it. “Leave him out of this.”

I kept my sword poised at the man and reached my other arm out to Avi, inviting her to my side. But she remained frozen where she stood.

“And not just any knight,” the man went on, fixing his intense gaze on me as if reading me like a book. “Fernshire’s bravest and most noble knight. Well done, Aviva. But I wonder, does he know the truth about you?”

“Who are you?” I practically growled at the man. “What do you want?”

“I’m King Abrax.” He straightened his jacket and held his head high. “Surely you’ve heard of me.”

So here was the man who had tricked Avi—who had killed his own brother and stolen his throne. I remained silent, but the look on my face must have said it all.

“Ah, my reputation precedes me.” Abrax seemed pleased by my revulsion.

“You’re a murderer.” I practically spat the words at him.

He held up a black-gloved finger. “But you’re missing one important detail. I may have killed my brother, but *she’s* the one who gave me the poison.”

My gaze faltered, flickering toward Avi, whose eyes were filled with tears. Was this a manifestation of the guilt she carried with her for years? The derisive voice in the back of her head that held her captive?

“You manipulated her,” I said slowly, enunciating every word to help Avi see the truth. “She didn’t know what she was doing. What you were capable of.”

“Didn’t she?” Abrax said the words to me but he advanced on her, the leather of his polished boots gleaming in the candlelight with every slow step. Everything about this man was stately, commanding attention. I could only imagine how he had used that to his advantage—showering Avi with his attentiveness, pulling her into his web, while weaving his lies so expertly that she believed herself to blame. “Surely you had some

suspicion, Aviva? Your own sister did. Face it, you wanted the power just as much as I did. That's why you gave me the poison."

"No," Avi said. "I didn't—"

But Abrax didn't let her finish. "So much knowledge in that pretty head of yours." He reached her side and stroked a finger down her cheek. "Perhaps you would have made a fine queen . . . But you were a loose end. And loose ends always need to be tied up."

"Don't touch her!" I tried to reach Avi's side, but guards emerged from the crush of bodies, rushing forward to block me. "Avi, don't listen to him."

"And all this time," Abrax said, "I had no idea that my knights had failed . . . But never fear, that can still be rectified. Come with me."

"No!" Avi backed away from him.

"Leave her alone!" I shoved against the three guards who blocked me, two at my side and one in front of me.

"Yes," Abrax said calmly to Avi as he raised his hand in the air. "*She* needs something from you."

Abrax took one step closer, but he didn't reach for Avi. Instead, he clenched the fingers of his raised hand as if grasping an unseen object.

Avi clutched her throat. Then she clawed at it as if trying to release an invisible hand. But it was no use; she collapsed to her knees.

"You always were difficult." A vein throbbed in Abrax's forehead. "I'm afraid we have to do this the hard way."

His fingers squeezed into his palm and then Avi's eyes rolled into the back of her head, while she choked for air.

"No!" I screamed, fighting against the guards' hold as she slumped and fell to the ground.

Chapter 20
- AVIVA -

"Stop!" The voice was distant but familiar, and the powerful word was punctuated by the clang of metal. Air rushed back into my lungs.

My dizzy head spun, but I blinked and looked up. I coughed as my fuzzy mind registered the scene before me.

Bayne had overpowered the guards who lay in a fallen heap upon the dance floor. He was now locked in a swordfight with Abrax. The crush of dancers had retreated to the side of the ballroom, leaving the two men to do battle with their gleaming blades. The onlookers' vacant, phantom eyes glittered hungrily behind their masks as if this was the evening highlight they'd all been waiting for.

"Bayne." My voice was hoarse as I struggled to sit up from the cold marble floor.

"Avi," Bayne called back to me, although he didn't take his eyes off Abrax. "You need to get out of here. Run! Hide."

"I can't leave you." I pulled myself upright.

"You must. It's *you* he's after. I'll find you—just go."

I nodded numbly, then turned and stumbled forward, past the crowd, their jewels and fine garb taunting me. This was the kind of ball Abrax had once promised I would attend with him as his queen. What I once thought would be a dream come true. All around me was glittering splendor, but I wasn't fooled. This wasn't a place of dreams—it was a place of nightmares.

I raced from the ballroom and hurried down the garden steps, away from the grand castle. My footsteps echoed on the stone path, and without a look back, I plunged into a gap in the hedgerow, the entrance to a thick garden maze.

As I followed the maze's twists and turns, my breath was heavy in my ears. It was dark in the garden, the hazy red sky above the only thing offering light.

Something pulled at my voluminous skirt and my heart faltered. I whipped around, expecting to see Abrax's hand enclosed around the shimmering fabric, pulling me toward him. But no, it was simply the hedgerow brambles tugging at my long hem.

I yanked it loose, then bunched my gauzy skirt in my hands, and pressed forward. Every so often, I reached a fork in the maze, and each time, I chose at random. I tried to commit my path to memory, to find my way back if I needed to, but in my fear and haste, it all became a jumble in my mind.

Bayne had said to hide, that he'd find me, but with every turn I took, a gnawing fear grew that he wouldn't be able to. Perhaps I should've stopped and waited, but I was too scared of being found by Abrax in this dark labyrinth.

I wound around a curve, and this time I wasn't met with a fork, but rather an archway in the hedgerow. A soft red glow radiated through its opening.

My steps stopped.

The light beckoned. What was the likelihood that Bayne had somehow gotten here first? That he was on the other side of the glowing threshold?

A breeze flittered through the archway; the softest word carried past me in a whisper.

"Aviva . . ."

The breeze knew my name. I shouldn't have been surprised. All my darkest memories and deepest fears were known to this place. Why would my name be any different?

"Aviva . . ."

There it was again. The skin at the back of my neck prickled, sensing a threat.

I turned to go back the way I came, but no sooner had I taken a step when a vicelike grip closed around my waist.

"I've been looking for you," a familiar voice growled in my ear, causing my fight instinct to spring to life.

Kartoff bellowed when I stomped on his foot as hard as I could. He groaned when I elbowed him in the ribs and cursed when I scratched my fingernails clean across his face.

"You witch!" He thrust me from him with such force, I crashed against the cobblestones. I scrambled to my feet, but Kartoff was too quick.

A flash of metal crossed my vision as Kartoff lifted the length of his whip over my head and around my neck—no longer in feline form, but a chain once more. He pulled it taut, cutting off my air as he taunted in my ear, “Where’s your knight now, eh?”

I clawed and gasped, but the pressure was too much.

“Did he get tired of you too?” Kartoff continued to mock me. “I’m going to enjoy killing you even more now than I did the first time.” He swore at me again, and although my ears turned fuzzy, somewhere in the distance a loud chiming filled the air, the toll of a clock. Over and over it chimed, like the peal of my own funeral toll. Mingled with it were Kartoff’s grunts as he held the whip tight and his occasional sinister laugh.

Just when I thought I might black out, the bell stopped, only to be replaced by an enraged shriek.

“You fool!” A great blow knocked me to the ground, but I was so relieved to be gasping air again, I barely felt the pain.

“I told you to bring her to me, not kill her!” an angry female voice cried.

“But, Your Majesty, she—”

“Silence, you insolent fool!” A loud slap followed, and when I turned around, I almost passed out, not from a lack of air but from the sight before me.

Standing over a cowering Kartoff, her eyes filled with murderous rage, was a woman dressed all in red, wearing a huge flowing ball gown and a glittering ruby crown. But that wasn’t what was most remarkable about her.

No. The woman in red was me.

I blinked, my heart hammering in my chest as I took in the scene.

We were no longer surrounded by the small pathway of hedges. It was as if the hedges had somehow retreated to make way for this majestic version of me. We were now in a courtyard garden, surrounded by rose bushes and the glow of hundreds of candelabras.

The chiming that had stopped after the twelfth stroke suddenly made sense, for behind the woman was the same grandfather clock Bayne and I had seen before. But there was one distinct difference.

The mirror was empty.

All that reflected in it were the bushes. My body showed no reflection. Nor did the red-garbed version of me. And at the top, both clock hands rested at twelve.

But how could that be?

“I suppose it all makes sense now, doesn’t it?” the woman in red asked, her voice deceptively sweet. She stepped toward me, her full crimson skirt almost hiding Kartoff cowering at her feet.

“You’re the image we saw,” I said. “In the mirror—my reflection. Only now . . .”

“Only now I’ve been freed from my glass prison.”

“Who *are* you?” I stared in horror at this rendering of myself come to life. A face I knew so well—and yet, not. I’d never seen such evil in my own eyes.

“Isn’t it obvious? I *am* you. The other side of you, at least. The daring side. The side that isn’t afraid to take what she wants. Who isn’t afraid of her power.” With every word, she took a slow step toward me, head held high, gliding like royalty. “I’m the side you tried to keep hidden for so long.”

“No . . .” I shook my head over and over, not wanting to see this reality. “It’s not possible.”

“Yes, here it is. Don’t you see, Aviva?” The Red Queen lifted a hand. “This whole place exists because of you—it’s a combination of your worst fears, your worst memories. And I rule here. Because *I* rule *you*.”

“No.” I swallowed, not wanting to believe that this evil side of me was truly real, that it had manifested in this manner. “No, you don’t.”

“You’re weak.” Her painted red lips sneered at me. “You’re a failure. Face it, Aviva, I’m the better half of the two of us. All this time you’ve been here, I’ve been growing in strength, becoming more real . . . But alas, we both can’t coexist. One of us must win. One of us will make it back to your world.” She stopped above me, then grabbed my hand, yanking me to my feet. “And that’s why I need you.”

I pulled my hands from her ice-cold touch, but she didn’t seem fazed. The frown that marred her flawless complexion wasn’t directed at me.

“But first”—she faced Kartoff—“this fool must pay for defying me.”

“Your Majesty, please,” Kartoff pleaded. “I swear to you, it won’t happen again—”

“Of course it won’t.” She laughed lightly, then called out, “Knight!”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” A familiar sturdy figure emerged from the shadows and my hands flew to my mouth.

“Bayne?” I gasped.

But this red-garbed version of Bayne didn’t give me a second look. Just like the Red Queen was my mirror image brought to life, this Red Knight was Bayne’s mirror version. I stared at him, at his hard, cold eyes. At his fierce, determined gaze. Physically, he was the same as the kind, protective knight I knew, but his essence was so different. This wasn’t a knight who wanted to protect. This was a knight who wanted to destroy.

The Red Queen smirked at the Red Knight. And then she pointed to Kartoff and commanded, “Off with his head.”

Chapter 21
- BAYNE -

Avi’s horrified scream led me to her in the garden maze.

And the scene I came upon was unlike anything I’d imagined, even in my worst nightmares.

There were two Avis. The one I knew, dressed in white, although the hem of her gown was now streaked with blood. And another, dressed all in red. She stood tall and proud with a vicious gleam in her eye as she gazed at the lifeless body that was only partially visible where it lay fallen in the bushes.

I knew from the clothing he wore that the headless man was Kartoff.

My stomach turned at the sight, but I didn’t have time to process the mixture of horror and relief. No, Avi and I had a new enemy now.

Which I realized when the Red Queen pulled a long dagger from the folds of her skirt and advanced on Avi. “Now we end this.”

“No!” I raced into the garden, past the hedgerow opening, my sword drawn.

The Red Queen whirled around, while Avi backed away from her, stumbling over the legs of Kartoff’s lifeless body. She fell to the ground beside him.

Before I could reach the Red Queen, a figure leaped in my path, a long blade meeting my own with an angry clash.

When my gaze met my opponent’s, I almost dropped my sword. I took a stumbling step backward, giving him a chance to advance.

My opponent was me.

“What the devil are you?” I lunged at him, determined to strike this terrible manifestation down. Dressed all in red, he was my equal in every way. The only difference was our eyes, for I had never seen that vicious, power-hungry gleam in my own.

The Red Queen gave a maniacal laugh, watching our battle hungrily. “Surely you recognize my most loyal knight. He’s as devoted to me as you

are to her.”

The Red Knight grunted as his sword came dangerously close to piercing my side. I twisted just in time to block it.

“The time has come for you to face your greatest enemy, Sir Bayne.” The Red Queen seemed to delight in goading me. “Your bravery and compassion won’t save you now. Useless traits. He will outlast you because he is power. Greed. Self-preservation. And once he destroys you, your body will be waiting for him in your world.”

“This is how we get back.” The realization hit me. “It’s all been leading up to this moment, hasn’t it? Where our light sides meet the dark sides?”

The Red Queen nodded. “And now the battle has begun.”

Chapter 22
- AVIVA -

I watched in horror as Bayne battled with the Red Knight—with himself. The Red Queen was only a few paces away, watching the scene with hungry eyes, her dagger gripped tight.

Bayne had granted me some time, but it was only borrowed. The Red Queen had a weapon and I had nothing. Once she grew tired of the fight, she would turn her attention back to me.

She would end me, and if what she said was true, she would finally be free to cross back into our world and inhabit my body.

Our only hope was for Bayne to defeat the Red Knight and then defeat the Red Queen as well.

But could he do it?

Physically, the two men were an even match, but my Bayne had already been through a fierce swordfight with Abrax at the ball. Could he win another?

Movement in the bushes flashed in the corner of my eye, and I flinched, thinking Kartoff had come to life again somehow.

But no, when I glanced at the rose bushes at my side, Kartoff was still dead. However, I spied a flash of white between the brambles beside me on the ground.

The white rabbit.

I held my breath as it caught my eye, inclined its head, then nudged Kartoff's lifeless body with its nose.

I stared at the creature. Did he not realize the man was dead?

Still, he nudged Kartoff again, at the same spot at his side, where bloodstains blended into the crimson velvet of his jacket.

Hesitantly, I reached out a hand and slowly tugged Kartoff's jacket open. The rabbit nudged me in encouragement. I plunged my fingers into his jacket, then felt the folds of an inner pocket. I reached inside.

And pulled out my dagger.

I suppressed a gasp, careful not to reveal my delight. Here was my chance, my one chance to end the Red Queen while she was distracted.

I shot to my feet, hiding the dagger between the folds of my white skirt, and advanced on the Red Queen.

I raced toward her, preparing to bury the dagger into her shoulder blades, but before I could, she whipped around, sending her own dagger flying.

Its blade landed straight in my chest.

The impact stopped me in my tracks. The pain sent me to my knees. I looked down at my white dress, where a slow red stain pooled at my chest.

I sucked in a raspy breath, but it only magnified the pain coursing through my body.

Laughing wickedly, the Red Queen took a step toward me. “Oh, you foolish girl, you thought you could catch me by surprise? We’re two sides of the same coin.” She tapped the side of her head with one slender finger.

My blood ran cold as I recalled Bayne’s father had used the same words in his cottage. Had it been a trick? It took all my strength not to glance back at the rabbit in the bushes who had alerted me to the dagger in Kartoff’s coat.

The Red Queen went on. “I know your every thought the moment you think it . . . Face it, you’re weaker than me. And your failure has cost you again.”

“Avi!” Bayne called my name from across the courtyard. Despite my blurred vision, my gaze locked with his. He rushed toward me, momentarily forgetting the battle he fought.

“Bayne, no, don’t—”

But my warning was too late.

The Red Knight advanced on him. He plunged his sword into Bayne’s back. Again. And again, even while Bayne stumbled toward me.

“No,” I cried, but my word was weak.

Bayne fell mere feet from me, his hand outstretched as blood pooled around him at a much faster rate than the wound in my chest.

“Avi.” Bayne’s voice was raspy as he reached for me. “I’m sorry, I—”

“It’s not . . . your fault.” I wove my fingers through his, a small comfort as we both lay dying underneath the ever-darkening bloodred sky of this terrible world. “You . . . tried.”

The Red Queen stood over both of us, a snide smile on her face. “Yes, you both tried. But your love for each other was your weakness.” She placed a glittering red shoe atop my stomach and sent me onto my back, causing the pain in my body to double, then she wrenched her dagger from my chest. Blood poured from my wound.

“The battle is won.” The Red Queen straightened, then turned to the giant clock as it began to chime. “Look.”

Through the haze of my pain, I followed her gaze. The looking glass began to shimmer and a red circle of light began to spin.

“The portal is opening!” The Red Queen headed toward the mirror, then cast a scornful look over her shoulder at me and Bayne. “With you defeated, we’ll soon be able to pass.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, unable to take the pain anymore. Beside me, Bayne took gasping breaths, fighting for his life, but I knew it was only moments before he took his last.

I had no energy left to speak. I stared up into the crimson sky turning darker by the moment.

The Red Queen was right. Once again, I’d failed. I’d tried to make the right choice, but it had only led to my destruction. Evil had won, and any good Bayne and I had left in us would die.

A nudge at my shoulder stirred me and I lifted my head, expecting to see the Red Queen standing over me to gloat once more. But no, she still stood before the swirling mirror with the Red Knight at her side, waiting for the portal to open fully, for their chance to leave this world. So confident in their victory, they’d already forgotten us.

The nudge returned. I turned my head, and once again saw the white rabbit. It pressed its nose against my shoulder over and over.

I wanted to scream at it. Ask it what it could possibly want. Was it gloating too? Was it happy it had helped lead to my final downfall?

But the moment it had my attention, it stopped nudging me and returned to Kartoff’s body. It began sniffing his jacket again, tapping its twitchy nose against the same spot as before.

With what little strength I had left in my weakening body, I dragged myself toward it.

“What . . . is it?” My words were a ragged whisper. “No weapon . . . can help . . . us now.” But despite my despair, I reached into Kartoff’s jacket

and my fingers closed around smooth glass.

I pulled the object out and stared at the small flask with the *Drink Me* tag still attached to its neck. I almost threw it across the garden. What use was it? Was the rabbit telling me to poison myself to end this terrible pain?

The rabbit returned and nudged my hand holding the flask, as if encouraging me to drink it.

I stared at the poison.

"*Everything is topsy turvy here* . . ." The memory of Bayne's father's voice rang in my ears, followed by Bayne's own voice saying, "*What should help us, hurts us*."

If that was the case, then this . . .

"Will this heal us?" I asked the rabbit.

A definitive nod.

I gasped, checking to make sure the Red Queen and Red Knight still had their backs to us. They did, and the portal was almost the size of the mirror now.

I turned toward Bayne. He lay still, his eyes closed.

"Bayne," I whispered. "Can you hear me? Look at me?"

"Avi . . ." His eyelids fluttered open and he released a weak breath.

I uncorked the flask and did my best to lift his head.

"Bayne, drink this," I whispered. "Please."

He groaned softly and his face twisted in disgust as I emptied the flask's contents into his mouth.

"Swallow," I commanded.

And he did.

"It's time!" the Red Queen shouted by the mirror.

Bayne fell still.

"No . . ." I looked up to where the mirror flashed, a clear passageway now revealed.

The Red Queen stepped in, followed by the Red Knight.

The mirror flashed red. And then a splintering crack rang out. The swirling stopped and the mirror shattered.

Next to me, Bayne's body glowed white. And then he coughed.

And a terrible shriek rang out from the mirror. I looked up to see the Red Queen and the Red Knight inside the splintered glass, banging their fists upon it. But it was no use.

I had closed the portal just in time.

They were trapped in the mirror once more.

“Avi.” Bayne sucked in a full breath of air and he sat up. The wounds on his back were gone.

“Avi, you did it!” Bayne turned to me, amazed. “You defeated them. You healed me. How?”

I held out the empty flask. “It was never . . . poison . . . not for us.” Too weak to keep my head up, I slumped, but Bayne caught me in his arms.

“But it killed the tree.”

“The tree was part of this world. We . . . aren’t.” I struggled to get the next words out as my strength continued to fade, knowing they needed to be said. “Your father . . . wasn’t trying to hurt us. He was trying . . . to help us.”

“But you—why didn’t you drink it too?” Bayne stared at me, horrified, pressing his hands against my wound.

I shook my head weakly. “There wasn’t . . . enough.” I coughed. “There was only one flask left.”

“Why did you give it to *me*?” Bayne’s voice turned desperate, his eyes filling with tears. “You should have drunk it yourself. *I* broke the other flask. Oh, Avi, no.”

“It’s better . . . for you.” I reached a hand to his cheek. “To go . . . back. Look.”

A light popping sounded behind us. The mirror was repairing itself, and once it was whole, a white circle began to swirl.

“How?” Bayne stared at it.

“The battle . . . is won.” I repeated the Red Queen’s words. Having defeated her and the knight—having trapped them where they belonged—the portal was opening for us now. “You can go home.”

“I won’t leave you,” Bayne said fiercely, scooping me into his arms. “We’ll go back together . . . there has to be a way to save you.”

I didn’t answer as he marched toward the portal, finally letting my eyes close and the dizziness overtake me.

There was no way to save me.

I knew that.

But it didn’t matter. I could accept my fate, knowing that Bayne would return home.

Just before he reached the swirling doorway of light, my world went black.

Chapter 23
- BAYNE -

I blinked and lifted my head from against a stone wall. There were voices and shouting all around me, but I was oddly removed from it.

My eyes regained focus and the ringing in my ears stopped.

"Avi?" I looked around the room, taking in my surroundings.

I was back in the Fernshire castle.

"Avi!" I lunged toward the group in the corner where I could barely make out Avi's body on the floor, clothed in the same blue traveling gown she'd worn the day we left our world. But chains held me to the wall, stopping me from moving more than a few feet.

"Bayne?" Princess Opal whirled around and stared at me. "Is it really you?"

"Yes," I panted, easing my fight against my restraints so she could see I was lucid. "Yes, it's me. Please release me. I need to help her." My voice cracked on the last word. I feared it was too late.

With a rustle of movement and a clatter of metal, Opal was by my side, unfastening the shackles at my wrists and feet. "You're back! How did you do it?"

"Avi— Alice did it." It was the only explanation I had time for right now. The moment I was free, I crossed the room and knelt by Avi's side.

She was deathly white, her eyes closed, and she lay completely still on the floor.

"No." The disbelieving whisper fell from my lips.

"I don't know what happened." Opal's betrothed knelt next to her. "She started convulsing a few minutes ago. The guards called for us. We've been trying to revive her, but . . ." His eyes turned downcast.

But there was nothing they could do.

Avi had solved the puzzle. She'd saved me, but it had been too late to save herself.

I pulled her into my arms, tears falling into her hair as I held her close. “I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

And then I wept freely.

A hand clasped my shoulder, offering support, but I barely felt it. My entire body was numb. All except my heart, which felt as if it were splitting in two. I’d found the other half of me—the one who truly understood me. Who had convinced me there was more to me than my past. That I was more than my mistakes and failures.

I’d gone after her into the mirror world in hopes of saving her, but in the end, she’d saved me. Physically and mentally.

And I never even had a chance to thank her for it.

Somewhere beyond the sound of my grief was the soft murmur of voices, those in the room trying to make sense of what had just occurred.

As if there could ever be any sense in Avi’s death.

Chapter 24
- AVIVA -

The sting of death was bitter.

Literally, for a foul taste filled my mouth the moment I became aware.

But still, I knew a strange sort of peace, for my last living memory was of Bayne reaching the white light's threshold, cradling me in his arms.

How I would miss his gentle touch.

But I would be at peace knowing I had sent him back home. That he would go on to live his life.

"Well done, Teacup." A soft voice broke through my thoughts. "Well done."

I blinked and the sight of a messy cottage greeted me.

I swallowed. The bitterness in my mouth subsided as a sticky liquid slid down my throat.

"All gone," the same soft voice said, and a crinkly smile came into view.

I gasped. "It's you."

"And it's you," Bayne's father said. "Well done to you as well, my dear. You solved the riddle just in time. I couldn't tell you before, you see. It broke the rules of this world." He looked around with a sigh. "This strange, mad world . . . But I knew you were clever. I knew you'd figure it out." He chuckled. "And Teacup, well, he didn't break any rules because he can't talk, can he?" He stroked the white rabbit, who nuzzled his hand.

"I don't understand . . ." I glanced around the cottage where I had been once before. "I thought I died."

"Not quite." Bayne's father held up a finger. "But you came awfully close. You would have, I'm afraid, but you passed out just in time, and the world brought you here." He lifted an empty flask with a *Drink Me* tag around its neck. "Luckily, I had a spare."

That explained the bitter liquid that had brought me out of my stupor. I pressed a hand to my wound, now gone.

“It healed me,” I said.

“But of course!” Bayne’s father laughed. “Why else do you suppose I put *Drink Me* on it? My instructions were very clear.” He shook his head with a *tsk*. “That boy of mine was always one for complicating things.”

I smiled and shook my head. “Of all the places . . . when I passed out, the world brought me here. How odd.”

“Is it?” Bayne’s father cocked his head to the side, and only then did I notice that the mirror portal had joined me here as well—and the white light was still spinning. “You defeated the Red Queen. You sacrificed yourself for Bayne. The battle was won. The world knew exactly where to take you.”

“The world knew . . .” I repeated his words slowly, trying to understand how the world we’d fought against for so long had actually helped me.

“Yes, the world is at rest now. Surely you can feel it?”

I looked around the little cottage. Out the windows that were no longer shut up tight, I could see beautiful flowers blooming. I could hear the happy trill of birds. And the sky was no longer red, but a glowing, vibrant pink, like a beautiful sunrise.

As I sucked in a deep breath, a weight lifted off me like I hadn’t experienced in a long time. “It does feel peaceful now,” I agreed.

“But”—Bayne’s father gave a knowing smile—“I have a feeling this is not where you were meant to stay.”

“Could I stay here?” I asked.

He nodded with a sad smile. “If you wish.”

If I wanted to, I could avoid the fate that awaited me in my world. I could finally be at peace.

But would I really be happy?

And more importantly, would Bayne?

I shook my head. I knew he wouldn’t, not thinking that he had failed me. And so, my answer was clear.

“I can’t stay,” I said to Bayne’s father.

His face broke out into a wide grin. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

At that moment, the clock above the spinning mirror began to slowly chime.

“Now go—quickly.” Bayne’s father pointed toward it. “It will close once the clock strikes twelve, and then you will have no choice.”

I jumped to my feet, surprisingly spry considering I had almost bled to death minutes before. But I paused at the mirror and turned back. “Wait—I have one more question. How are you here? Bayne said you had died. Everything else in this world was so terrible, how did you find a way through to help us?”

“It’s quite simple, really.” Bayne’s father spun his top hat in his hands, a twinkle in his eye. “Those we love and lose are never really gone. They remain wherever we are. They go wherever we go. Some bonds just can’t be broken . . . Does that make sense?”

I smiled and nodded. Further proof that this world—and he—were truly at peace. His words made more sense than anything we had encountered here before. “Thank you for everything.”

“But of course, my dear.” He pressed his palm into mine, folding my fingers over a bundle of paper. “I wonder if you might give my son a message for me?”

“I’d be happy to.”

The last thing I saw before crossing the threshold was Bayne’s father placing his threadbare hat atop his head while he gave me a jaunty nod.

❃❃❃

Time is a peculiar thing. No one knows how much is promised to us—how many turns of the clock we get until it winds no more.

Yes, time is perhaps the strangest gift we’ve been given. So easy to squander, yet so hard to pass when we most want it to. We’re so often late for things that truly matter, yet right on time for things that don’t. We wait unceasingly for the future, then lament how quickly the past is gone.

Time, indeed, is a peculiar thing.

That was the lesson I learned the day the Red Queen tried to make my life hers. A life I couldn’t imagine anyone wanting, a life that I had stopped believing had value—until I risked losing it completely.

My clock stopped that day.

But when it began again, I truly began living.

I awoke to sound first. A terrible sound of someone grieving a deep loss. It broke my heart, yet it awoke something in me—begging me to remember why I cared about this man's pain.

Touch followed, a heavy sensation, for I was being crushed against another's chest. It should have been uncomfortable—and in a way it was—but there was a sense of belonging as well.

Scent brought with it memories—the smell of lush vegetation and crushed roses on his jacket brought visions of a dense forest, an ominous garden, and a vivid red sky.

And finally, sight. I blinked and a familiar face brought it all rushing back.

"Bayne . . ." My voice was so weak, it's a wonder he even heard it at all.

But he did.

I knew the instant it reached his ears, for his defeated body hunched over mine became alert once more.

He pulled back. "Avi?"

"Bayne." I was still dazed and tired, but it didn't matter. The moment my gaze locked with his, I never wanted to shut my eyes again.

"You're alive!" Light ignited in Bayne's tear-filled eyes once more, his hand flying to my cheek, stroking it softly. "Avi . . . How—how are you here? You were bleeding so much—"

"Your father . . ." My words were still weak, but I pressed on because Bayne needed to know. "I passed out just before you crossed the threshold. And the world knew exactly where to take me—to your father. He had another flask and it healed me."

"My father . . ." Bayne shook his head slowly, taking it all in. "All along, he wasn't trying to hurt us . . ."

"He was trying to help us."

"And Kartoff . . . Why do you think he kept our flask? Do you think he knew it could heal?"

"It's hard to say . . . He may have truly thought it was harmful like we did. But it doesn't matter, it was never meant for him. Here." I held up my right hand and unfurled my fingers. "Your father asked me to give you this."

Bayne took the paper from me and unfolded it. "What is this?"

Inside was a slightly rusty brass key. Bayne turned it over in his fingers, letting the white paper fall to the ground.

“Look.” I pointed to it, sitting up slightly. “There’s a message.”

Bayne picked up the paper the key had been wrapped in. My eyes followed as he read the message out loud:

Son,

The past can imprison you or set you free.
It all depends which way you turn the key.

With love,

Your father

I grabbed Bayne’s hand as he stared at his father’s words in disbelief.

“But how? How did he . . .” He shook his head, tears filling up his eyes. “He wasn’t even real.”

I squeezed his hand. “Nothing we experienced there was reality . . . but that doesn’t mean it was any less real. And your father—he loves you. He forgives you.” I brought a soft hand to his cheek, wiping away the tears. “Now you need to forgive yourself.”

Bayne nodded, over and over, while he broke down once more. Gently, he pulled me into his lap, wrapping his arms around me and burying his face in my shoulder while he wept. But unlike when he thought I’d died, these tears were not tears of loss, but rather gain.

We clung to each other—relying on each other, but more importantly, cherishing each other. Cherishing the fact that even in our brokenness, we had found a way to become whole again.

Soon, I was crying too. Full, fresh tears of gratitude, for Bayne’s father’s words spoke as much truth to me as they did to Bayne.

For the second time in my life, I had cheated death. Only this time I wouldn’t wonder why. I wouldn’t question for what purpose I had been spared—no matter how undeserving I felt. My life was a gift and I would treat it as such—every imperfect part.

Epilogue

“Are you sure you won’t reconsider?” Bayne asked, staring at me with sad eyes as he took my hand.

“I have to do this,” I said with a small shake of my head.

He nodded his understanding and squeezed my fingers, just as the huge ornate door opened.

“The queen will see you now,” the Tover knight said, then stood aside to let me pass the threshold.

Before I did, I took one last look behind me at the people I loved most in the world.

My sister, Laurel, wrapped in the arms of her husband, Gavin. Bayne had kept the promise he made to me that day we met in Eternity Forest. Not long after we awoke in Fernshire, he did help me return to Tover and find my sister.

Not only had we found her alive and well, but we’d discovered she and Gavin had been instrumental in Abrax’s takedown and had had quite the adventure of their own.

I smiled at her. My heart was full, knowing she was not just safe, but happy. She returned my smile, although a lone tear trickled down her cheek. She, like Bayne, didn’t like what I was about to do, but she also understood why I had to do it.

And finally, I gave Bayne one last look. He fought back tears but gave me an encouraging nod. My heart ached at the sight of him hurting because of me.

“My brave knight . . .” I placed a hand to his cheek. “Thank you for understanding.”

He kissed my palm and then he let me go.

With a deep breath, I entered the room and sank into a curtsy before Queen Roselynn of Tover.

“Your Majesty.” My voice was strong, although it shook slightly, and I couldn’t meet her gaze. “Thank you for taking the time to meet with me

today.”

“Of course.” Her voice was kind and gentle. “Anything for Laurel’s sister. What can I do for you?”

A moment of silence, and then the words I’d been so fearful to say for so long came rushing out of me.

“I’ve come to confess my crimes against the kingdom of Tover.”

There was a pause and then a rustle of movement, as the queen came to stand close to me.

“And what crimes are those?”

I finally raised my eyes. “The crime of supplying Abrax with the poison he used to kill your father.”

“I see . . .” Queen Roselynn exchanged a look with her husband, the king, then turned back to me. “Tell me, did you plot to end my father’s life along with my Uncle Abrax?”

“No, Your Majesty.”

“And did you know what Abrax intended to do with the poison when you gave it to him?”

“No, Your Majesty, but I was a fool to believe in him. I should have realized sooner—”

“Aviva.” Queen Roselynn took my hand. “Believe me when I say I know firsthand the extent of my uncle’s evil and manipulative ways. And believe it or not”—she cast a loving glance her husband’s way— “I know a thing or two about what it means to fall in love with the wrong man.”

My mouth fell open as my eyes flashed to the king.

“Not me,” he clarified, his eyes crinkling as he smiled. “I was the right man. Although it took a little while to convince her of it.”

“Yes, well”—his wife shot him a teasing smile—“maybe if you hadn’t captured me in the forest we would have gotten off on a better foot.”

I gaped at them both. This certainly was not how I’d imagined this audience with them going.

Queen Roselynn went on. “Aviva, as deeply as I regret and mourn my father’s death, I do not believe you truly played a hand in it.” She smoothed her skirt. “And I also have it on good authority from Princess Opal that you saved the entire kingdom of Fernshire.”

“Hardly the actions of a dangerous criminal,” the king added.

Roselynn nodded. “So let it be known, that on this day, the kingdom of Tover grants you full pardon.”

“You’re pardoning me?” I was too stunned to move.

She nodded and grabbed my hand, pulling me off the ground. “What kind of friend would I be to Laurel if I locked her sister in the dungeon?”

“Not only that . . .” The king slipped an arm around his wife’s waist. “I have a newly appointed Tover knight who would probably not be too happy about having to guard you.” He dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “And take it from someone who’s been there, the Tover dungeons are *not* very pleasant.”

“Thank you, Your Majesties.” I bowed before them both.

As the king and queen bade me farewell, the king rested a loving hand on Queen Roselynn’s abdomen. Only then did I notice the swell beneath her gown and recall that Laurel had said the king and queen were expecting their first child. I made a mental note to get their entire story from Laurel when I had the chance.

But first, I had a newly appointed Tover knight to find. Lucky for me, he was waiting with open arms the moment the door was opened.

✽✽✽

“Are you ready?” Bayne asked.

I stood beside my new husband, grinning, and nodded. He pushed the rusty key into the door’s lock.

“It fits,” Bayne said with amazement as the key clicked in place.

He pushed the door open, revealing a very dusty—but very adorable—stone cottage, sunlight streaming in through the broken shutters.

“I can’t believe it.” Bayne stepped inside, looking around in awe. “This place is just like I remember it.” He turned to me. “What do you think? It will need a lot of work, to be sure, but . . .”

“It’s perfect,” I said. “And besides, Laurel and Gavin said we can stay with them as long as we need.”

“Seeing as you’re not in too much of a hurry to leave your sister, I suppose that leaves me plenty of time to fix this place up.” Bayne pulled me

into his arms and grinned.

It was true. I cherished every moment we had gotten to spend with Laurel and her family these past few months since Bayne and I had been married. Although the Red Queen had been vanquished, there were times I felt a strange sort of gratitude for the new appreciation for my life—and my time—that my encounter with her had given me.

"I love the cottage." I looked up at Bayne. "But are you sure you can be happy here?" I knew that this place held sad memories for him.

"I already am." He kissed me softly. "And besides, I think my father was right . . . It's time I start recalling the happy memories, instead of the sad ones." He brushed a lock of hair away from my cheek. "And time for us to make some new ones of our own."

"That settles it then." I grabbed a broom that was nestled in the corner and freed it from some cobwebs. "I say we start cleaning." But before I could sweep a stroke, a thumping outside the door made me pause.

"Who do you suppose that is?" Bayne asked, pausing from where he was removing sheets from furniture stacked in the corner.

I shrugged and followed him to the door.

When Bayne opened it, there was no one there.

Or so we thought.

"What on earth—" Bayne jumped to the side as a fuzzy ball of white bounced past his legs.

"Teacup!" I knelt and scooped the large white rabbit into my arms.

"How—" Bayne gaped at me. "How did you know I called my rabbit Teacup?"

I laughed. "Well, I don't think this is *your* Teacup, but"—I paused and nuzzled the mischievous little creature—"I met a critter such as this when we were trapped in the mirror world. And if I had to guess, I'd say your father is sending us his blessing."

"Of all the peculiar things . . ." Bayne laughed and reached out his large hand to pat the rabbit on its head. "I suppose we have room for one more."

"Only one more?" I set the rabbit on the ground and placed a light hand on my belly, inclining my head with a smile.

"Avi—" Bayne's eyes widened, then he took my hand and pulled me into his arms. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

A blush spread across my cheeks at the grin on his face. “It’s still early, but as a healer, I’m quite good at recognizing the signs.” I spread my hands across his chest. “And you, Sir Bayne, are going to be a father.”

Bayne let out an uncharacteristic whoop, then turned to where the rabbit had settled himself in the corner. “Did you hear that, Teacup? I’m going to be a father.”

“Oh, dear . . .” I shook my head with a light *tsk*. “My husband talks to rabbits.”

Bayne cupped a hand around his ear for a few beats as if he were listening, then he turned to me. “And what do you know, he *does* talk back.”

“Oh, really?” I placed a hand on my hip, laughing. “And what did he say?”

Bayne pulled me in for a deep, lingering kiss, then broke away, his eyes twinkling. “That I’m the luckiest man alive.”

THE END

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The Shattered Tales

The Shattered Tales is a collection of twelve fractured retellings of your favorite fairy tales. They can be enjoyed in any order, so fall in love with the sweet romance, magical adventures, and tale-shattering twists one happily-ever-after at a time!

To Shatter a Slipper: A Cinderella Retelling by Abigail Manning
To Betray a King: A Frog Prince Retelling by Annette K. Larsen
To Escape a Wonderland: An Alice in Wonderland by Cece Louise
To Defy a Dream: A Sleeping Beauty Retelling by Mary Mecham
To Break a Silence: A Little Mermaid Retelling by Lydia Mae
To Deceive a Kingdom: A Princess & the Pea Retelling by Kathryn Radaker
To Heal a Broken Heart: A Beauty & the Beast Retelling by Aveline Brooke
To Curse a Black Swan: A Swan Lake Retelling by Leialoha Humpherys
To Crack a Soldier: A Nutcracker Retelling by Sarah Beran
To Rival a Reflection: A Snow White Retelling by Selina De Luca
To Destroy an Illusion: A Glass Mountain Retelling by Kendra E. Ardnek
To Capture a Beauty: A Snow Queen Retelling by Kimberly Pearl

About the Author

Cece Louise writes clean novels filled with adventure, romance, and spirit for teens and adults.

Cece is an avid reader who has been making up stories in her head as long as she can remember. Despite all that daydreaming, she graduated summa cum laude with a BBA from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee in 2012.

When she's not working on her latest story, Cece spends her time having adventures with her husband and two kids, hiking and biking in her home state of WI, and unfortunately, cleaning her house (which she is convinced is secretly inhabited by mischievous, mess-multiplying pixies).

Cece is currently working on more books. Visit her online:

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